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THE COMMANDANT OF BIRD ISLAND

S. D I K O V S K Y

THE COMMANDANT OF BIRD ISLAND



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PATRIOTS

Chapter One

THREE horsemen rode along the border in the direction of Medvezhya Guba from the Kazachka border-post. They were Captain Dubakh, Pavel Korzh, the volunteer, and his father, Nikita Mikhailovich Korzh, village blacksmith.

They rode in silence. The late Ussurian spring rolled in from the ocean along the taiga paths, caressed the naked oak branches with its warm breath and sent the skylarks winging joyously into the newborn skies. Close on its heels came the birds and bees, filling the air about the horsemen with the gladness of life's awakening.

The horses' hoofs clattered as they followed the path up a hill. The wind whipped the willows into green flame, the hazel and honeysuckle bushes reached out their transparent foliage to the sun and the ferns pointed upward like sharp sturdy arrows; the elms alone were deaf to the persuasions of the brook; a dank chill emanated from the gullies.

They rode on for a long time, fording brooks, pushing through briars and brambles and past groves of dwarf oaks, until they came at last to the crest of the hill.

The land spread before them so vast and spacious that the horses unurged broke into a trot. To the south stretched Manchuria, desolate and covered with dun-coloured grass. The undulating earth looked restless, like the swell on a murky sea.

Nikita Mikhailovich, who always welcomed any excuse to recall the Mukden campaign, nudged his son with his elbow.

"Have you seen where your old man left his footprints, lad?" he asked, urging his horse forward.

"We'll look for them as we go on," said the young man with a smile. "You didn't serve in the infantry, did you?"

"No, the hussars. . . ."

"So that's why you cling to the saddle that way!"

The old man snorted in disgust. "I'd tell you something, Pavel. . . ."

"Go ahead."



"My horse isn't accustomed to bad language."

They rode on, the short, ruddy-faced father in his heavy cape, outspread like a bell, leading the way.

The path wound along the ridge, dived into streams, disappeared in among the boulders, and emerged again under the feet of the horses, points of quartz glinting on its stony surface. It was a dizzy path.

By now the grass was gone. The horses began to sink up to their fetlocks in brittle volcanic ash. Last year's burnt grass spread blackly about the riders. Nikita Mikhailovich's features darkened. The men were silent.

At last the horses came to a standstill. Pavel was the first to dismount. Beyond the stream lay a strange town of adobe dwellings flanked by four massive towers. Dubakh did not look at the town. Dismounting, he walked over to a stone slab and removed his faded cap.

"Read it for yourself," he said to Nikita Mikhailovich.

The letters, hewn roughly into the stone by some inept but powerful hand, were filled with rain water.

"He was a machine-gunner and a son of the people,
A terror to the bandits and a bulwark for his country.

A. N. KORZH,
November 1935."

Now it was April. Clouds shot through with sunlight sailed above; a few stubborn oak leaves that had survived the winter whirled over the crude gravestone.

Nikita Mikhailovich dismounted, took a notebook from

his pocket and jotted down the inscription. Dubakh appraised him through one half-closed eye. A black patch covered the other.

"I'm not so sure about the rhyme," he said slowly. "But it makes sense, all right."

Nikita Mikhailovich bent down and extracted an empty machine-gun cartridge from the ashes. He twirled it for a while between his fingers as though doubting whether his mischievous, pranky son Andrei could really have been a "terror to the bandits." The cartridge was still free from mould.

"So this was his position?" he asked finally without raising his eyes to Dubakh.

"Yes," replied the captain.

"Death was instantaneous, I suppose?"

"No."

Suddenly Nikita Mikhailovich wheeled round, and, grabbing his son by the shoulder, shook him with unwonted ferocity.

"Stop sniffling!" he cried, his voice hoarse with fury. "What the hell kind of a soldier are you! Snivelling, lily-livered sissy!"

He kept it up for a long time, abusing Pavel roundly. Pavel let him rave for a while. Then he shook off his father's hand and said gruffly:

"Take it easy, Pa, take it easy now. . . ."

Nikita Mikhailovich thrust the cartridge into his pocket. He turned to the captain and said more calmly:

"Soft, getting soft.... Something came over him today.... Ain't always that way...."

"I know," replied Dubakh, and moving away from the slab he launched into an account of the skirmish with the Japanese in which machine-gunner Korzh, who had held the left side of the hill, was killed.

It was a long story because it had taken four hours for the cavalry troop to reach the Japanese flank, and in the meantime Korzh had repulsed six enemy attacks.

By the time the captain finished his story the wind had dried up the stone. Pheasants emerged from the brush and sat warming themselves in the sun, taking no notice of the men. Spring tripped lightly over the paths, last year's grasses stirring in her wake.

"We picked up a Japanese ten feet away from the machine gun," Dubakh said. "He had fallen on his own grenade. That's what happens when you remove the detonator cap too soon."

"An officer?" inquired Pavel.

"No, a private second class."

"Lousy Samurai," growled Nikita Mikhailovich as he wound his cape around him and mounted his horse.

Chapter Two

... But he had not been a Samurai and he had never dreamed of such an exalted, unattainable status. The recruit's oilskin cape and blue work jacket with trademark

on the back still lay in the depot of the Sixth Rifle Regiment.

For four years this lanky youth had worked at a fertilizer factory on Hokkaido and had become so saturated with the stench of rotten herrings that his mates in the barracks at once dubbed him "fish-head." It was rather an apt nickname at that, for Sato thought of little besides herring, plaice and Pacific salmon. Brought up in awe of the village scribes, he was respectful to his superiors, diligent at his studies and reserved in his relations with his mates. Even on feast days, when the warm sake loosened the soldiers' tongues and those back from furlough entertained their comrades with stories of their adventures in the red light district, Sato had little to say. But the mere mention of the price of herring or the caulking of fishing boats was sufficient to transform Sato: his eyes would light up, his voice grow loud and he would begin to wave his strong arms about as though he were standing on the seashore and not in a barracks room, hemmed in on all sides by the rows of bunks. When it came to fish and fishing, Sato could hold his own with anyone, including the great *sindo** himself.

Sato had grown up on the western shore of Hokkaido and there was little he did not know about fishing. He could tell you all about salmon at spawning time, why

* Skipper.

plaice like cold water, and how much the fish merchants would give you for a basket of fresh shrimps....

Three months in barracks removed the acrid odour of fish, seaweed and tarred nets which Sato had exuded, but the nickname stuck like scales to a fish. In the evenings after drill, his mates liked to chaff the naive and painstaking northerner.

"*Ano-ne*!"* Tarada, the bugler, would shout, "who knows why you can see the bottom of the sea around Karafuto?"

Although everyone knew the answer, several wags would inquire innocently:

"Whatever happened to the sea, Tarada?"

"Really...."

"I'd say it dried up from sheer disgust," Miura, a burly giant, would remark significantly.

"Nothing of the kind," Tarada would declare triumphantly. "You can see the bottom because Sato gobbled up all the seaweed, that's why!"

There was no use complaining, for the sergeant major, who had a weakness for teasing country yokels, would be sitting by, ruddy with amusement, pretending not to hear Tarada's witticisms.

But now the barracks and the sergeant major were part of the dim past. For eight days the *Vugo-Maru* had been sailing along the west coast of Honshu, collecting colon-

* Listen!

ists in her roomy holds. The steamer was behind schedule. She was picking up peasant families from Otaru and Akita, lumberjacks from Aomori, carpenters from Muroran, basketweavers from the prefecture of Goyama and potters from Fukui. She had taken on barrels of pickled radish and *agar-agar*,* harrows, steam boilers, canvas vats for salting fish, and thousands of baskets and bundles of the most fantastic shapes. The farther south she crawled the deeper her rusty sides settled in the water. At Aomori you could still see the screws churning up the water, but by the time she reached Kanazawa even the name had disappeared under water. The captain stopped taking on cargo.

The last to come aboard were six stalwarts in mauve caps. They carried papers identifying them as barbers and luggage that was much too modest for colonists. They took their places in the second-class cabins along with the merchants and schoolteachers.

At last the boat steamed out into the open sea, taking from Honshu and Hokkaido exactly 1,500 future inhabitants of Manchukuo escorted by a company of riflemen.

The strong smell of uprooted humanity soon invaded the hold as the passengers settled themselves on the iron bunks. Those with families hung up curtains and lighted candles.

Issuing from the vessel's depths, their voices had a hollow ring. There were peasants from the south, fisher-

* Gelatinous substance obtained from seaweed and used in bacteriology, candy-making and the textile industry.

men, laundresses, unemployed seamen, street vendors, prostitutes, monks, gardeners and the usual smattering of fame-and-fortune seekers. There were surprisingly few children, Sato noticed. The settlers evidently did not place too much faith in the official reports from the war office that the partisans had long since been wiped out near Tsing-kiang.

This motley crowd shouted, swore and pestered the guards with questions. The ship rang with the clatter of their wooden sandals against the iron decks. The peasants gave the most trouble. Like uptorn shrubs with clods of earth still clinging to the roots, the settlers tried to take something of Japan away with them to the continent. They took along everything they could carry: rice, poles for drying laundry, braziers, holy images, straw hats, garden shears and square wooden bathtubs that had not dried for a whole century. Old men had even taken bits of nets. When the mate explained that there was no sea in Manchuria they meekly nodded their heads and exchanged knowing winks as soon as his fat back was turned. How could there be any land in the world without water? And where there was water there must surely be herring and crabs and plaice.

If they could, the stubborn creatures would have loaded on sails and ancient fishing boats and round glass floats. But the steamer was already ploughing along in the open sea, rolling with the swell and squirting jets of water from her sides.

"*Komattane*!"* the mate finally cried in disgust. "Arguing with you is like trying to tell a donkey about Buddah!"

"Quite so, Your Honour," was the polite reply hissed from the bunks.

"You'll have to drop all this rubbish in Seishin."

"Most certainly, Your Honour."

"Ouff!" breathed the mate, puzzled by this show of humility.

And he climbed up to the deck to finish a game of *mah-jong* he had started with the captain when they were still en route to Tsurugu.

In the meantime the blue strip of coast was fading slowly but surely. The nets with the little red buoys attached became less and less frequent. The sailboats with their square dark sails and the light fishing craft had disappeared altogether. Now the last bit of land, a humped island with dwarf pines on its crest, slipped by on the portside of the *Vugo-Maru*. The wind here evidently blew in one direction, for the trees stood with their branches outstretched toward the southwest as though about to fly away in the wake of the clouds. The *Vugo-Maru*, a rusty old tub of 6,000 tons, nosed her way unhurriedly through the waves. Beyond the stern seagulls fought for possession of a handful of scraps thrown overboard by the ship's cook.

* Confound it!

At last Honshu was left so far behind that you could not tell whether it was an island or just a blob of smoke.

A corporal dashed across the deck summoning the third squad to the forecastle.

Sato tore himself reluctantly from the rail. He hated to have to leave the deck for a two-hour Russian lesson. It was easier to march fifty kilometres in full kit than to pronounce those Russian words.

To put off the unpleasant duty Sato walked across the whole ship to the forecastle. The rest of the squad was already seated around the table, shouting phrases from Major Itoo's Russian grammar, when he entered. It was a strange language they produced; the vowels had difficulty in making themselves heard above the hissing sounds, and the "r's" wobbled about like a pea in a whistle.

Sato's neighbour was Tarada, a sailor from Osaka with bad teeth and a preternatural fondness for cracking jokes at the expense of his mates. He knew a little English, could swear in Chinese and claimed that you could understand Russian only after a bottle of sake.

The squad was studying the lesson entitled "Conversation With a Prisoner."

"Hands up!" yelled Sato. "Halt! Come here. Who are you?"

"I am a soldier of the Sixth Rifle Division," bellowed Tarada in response.

"Where you gone? Speak!! How many machine guns

in your regiment? Speak truthfully! What is the name of your commander?"

"He is Major Ivanov. How many machine guns? Perhaps thirty-four."

This was followed by conversations with a postman, a girl, a boy, an old man and a passer-by.

"Hey! Girl! Come here," coaxed Sato. "Abandon your fears.... Japanese soldier full of kindness."

"I am here, Mr. Officer," responded Tarada with mock humility.

"Look at me and reply with honour. Where is Russian officer and soldier? They jumped down here with a parachute."

"Excuse me.... I am delighted to see you, but I have not noticed them...."

"Nevertheless you lie. Do not speak deceitfully. This well has not yet been poisoned by soldiers? Thank God, we are not robbers. We are also Christians a little."

"Let's see your tongue," said Tarada as Sato closed his textbook with a bang. "These exercises are a damned dangerous business.... I know a soldier from the third platoon who had to have his tongue amputated."

"Rot," said Sato doubtfully.

"I swear.... You could hear the poor chap yelling all over the hospital." Tarada's mobile face assumed a sad expression. "Poor fellow dislocated his tongue at the fourth lesson," he added softly. "Too bad. He might have been saved. Better let me have a look at yours."

Still doubting, Sato cautiously showed the tip of his tongue.

"Open you mouth wider, pal, wider," ordered Tarada, looking stern. "Aha, I thought so.... It's all twisted up like a corkscrew."

And before Sato could withdraw his tongue the practical joker gave him a stinging uppercut.

There was a roar of laughter. Life on board ship was so dreary that even a bitten tongue was enough to afford a pleasant diversion.

Maddened by the pain, Sato threw himself on his tormentor with both fists.

"Now then, now then!" thundered Sergeant Major Ogawa. "Tarada! Up to your tricks again?"

"I was just explaining the pronunciation to him," said Tarada meekly.

"Silence! You behave as if you were in a brothel!"

And he strode out of the cabin to report the incident to his superior officer.

Sato's tongue burned like fire and he felt the salty taste of blood in his mouth. He glared with hatred at the miserable runt of a fellow whom he could easily have knocked down with a single blow of his fist.

Everyone knew that Tarada was an insolent braggart. He behaved as though the officer's reprimand did not concern him in the least.

"Talking about tongues," he remarked the minute the cabin door had closed behind the sergeant major. "Do you

know how they catch cats in Osaka? You take an iron hook and the stinkiest fish tail you can find. Then you hide behind a tree, and call 'Miaou, Miaou!' to the first alleycat that passes by. The cat likes the smell of the fish and answers your call. Then you throw your hook and catch her by the tongue or the cheek. Don't try it on kittens, their guts are too weak for samisen strings.... Although, lately, they say...."

The door burst open and Sergeant Major Ogawa reentered looking vastly pleased with himself.

"Tarada! Two days solitary confinement for you!" he announced.

"Yes sir!" Tarada responded calmly. "Right away?"

"No, as soon as we reach billets. The rest of you may amuse yourselves as you please."

There were two ways in which they could amuse themselves: by playing dominoes or playing the victrola with the few records marked with the personal stamp of the captain. They could also reread the schedule of watches pasted on the wall or admire the poster entitled "Happy Friendship." It was a beautiful poster. Two smiling boys—a Japanese and a Manchurian—were riding on donkeys toward the rising sun over a pistachio-coloured meadow. The boys rode close together with their arms over each other's shoulders. Below was the inscription: "The sun has risen for Manchuria. Soon the whole world will be a paradise."

But nobody looked at the poster. After 10 days on

board ship the smiling boys had become as much a part of the dreary scene as the sergeant major.

Four soldiers took possession of the dominoes. The rest sat on their bunks waiting their turn and discussing in low tones the immediate prospects for the colonists.

"They s-say, they'll be s-settled right along the f-frontier," stuttered Miyako.

"Yes.... I hear they'll be getting 100 *tsubo** per person."

"Who told you that?" asked Corporal Akita.

"I have it from the company clerk."

"Nobody knows anything about that yet," said the corporal shortly.

There was a pause.

"They s-say the Russians can s-sleep right on the s-snow," said Miyako apropos of nothing.

"Nonsense."

"They're terribly strong. I myself saw a Russian stevedore pick up two sacks full of beans."

"That's because they eat meat," the corporal explained importantly. "But they're very clumsy."

"The 'Shimbun-Mainichi' says they have first-class airplanes."

"Rubbish. Our fighter planes are the fastest in the world!" And Sergeant Major Ogawa launched into a detailed paraphrased version of chapter two of the pamphlet

* One *tsubo* equals 1/300 of a hectare.

"What the Japanese Soldier Should Know About the Russians." According to him, the population of Osaka was greater than that of the entire area between Lake Baikal and the Pacific Ocean. The Russians had so much land that a thousand *hori** was nothing to them. They were as lazy as Ainus and as greedy as the English. Iron and coal lay under their feet yet they hunted for gold in the north.

Good Japanese patriot that he was, the sergeant major had a very low opinion of the Russian soldier.

"The partisans are more dangerous than the regular troops," he wound up. "They can hit the bull's eye in the dark—unless they're drunk, of course."

The victrola needle began to scratch its way over a record and the soldiers fell silent as a mournful female voice sang a popular song about a Japanese soldier killed by Siberian partisans. The hero's mother was singing. Her voice was soft and mellow. If you closed your eyes you could picture the empty house, the strumming of a samisen in the street and the mother with her hands stretched over the brazier. Her hair cropped close in mourning for her son, she swayed from side to side, crooning:

An unknown soldier came to my house
And gave me a handful of pure white snow.
"May your grief melt like this pure white snow,"
The unknown soldier said to me.

---

* One *hori* equals 15.4 square kilometres.

"Where is Hakino?" I asked of him.
"The nets are empty and the boat is dry."
"The ocean takes unto itself none but the brave,"
The unknown soldier said to me.

The water lashed the ship's side above the heads of the listeners. The green, white-crested waves kept peeping into the portholes. Now and again the door opened and a light spray fell over the men. But the soldiers paid no attention to it. They were tall, round-headed lads from Hokkaido on their way to Siberia and the unknown. Each one of them was imagining himself in the place of the "slain Hakino."

"He would have been a lieutenant today," the song ended.

Tarada, who had taken advantage of an opportunity to peep at his neighbour's hand, slapped a domino down on the table.

"I would have been a corporal today!" he said mournfully.

That raised a laugh. Everyone knew that Tarada had been demoted to private second class for brawling.

Sato's tongue still burned. Tarada's prominent ears and stupid wisecracks sickened him.

Sato asked the corporal for permission to leave the room.

"What's wrong with you? This is the sixth time!" barked the officer.

"Excuse me, but I'm a bit seasick."

He walked up and down the deck, which was now hoary from the salt spray. Everything had changed beyond recognition in the past two hours. A fog now obscured the masts, the funnel and even part of the bridge. The bell clanged unceasingly. The forecastle, seen dimly from afar, looked like the hazy contours of a vessel sailing ahead. The *Vugo-Maru* seemed to be standing at anchor until you looked closer, and then a dozen little details betrayed her motion: the clanking of the rudder chains, the trembling of the hull, and the revolving of the log wheel. When Sato glanced over the rail he was amazed at the speed with which the murky water raced past the *Vugo-Maru*.

All the four hatches were open. The captain was economizing electricity, and candles afforded the only illumination at the bottom of the three-story hold. The passengers had quieted down; they had grown accustomed to the gloom, to the constant trembling of their iron bunks and the acrid odour of carbolic acid. The men played *mah-jong* and *hazi-hazi*, while the women knitted sweaters of rough wool. Through the low murmur of voices that rose from the hold now and again came the sound of a lone voice uplifted in song.

The hold looked like the cross-section of a tenement house. It was strange to see a rapid-fire gun mounted on the roof of such a peaceful dwelling. Covered by tar-

paulin, it stood in the stern of the *Vugo-Maru*, reminding the colonists of potential dangers.

There was always a small, curious crowd around the gun. The businesslike appearance of the soldiers, their steel helmets and stern faces aroused the respectful admiration of the country folk.

One of them, a peasant with sinewy hands pitted with boil scars, stopped Sato.

"Excuse me, Your Honour," he began timidly. "You have been north before, have you not?"

"Your Honour!" There was so much deference in the form of address. For the first time in his half a year in the army, Sato felt a true soldier. His ears reddened with pleasure. He was about to give a truthful reply to the naive question, but somehow his tongue would not obey him.

"Oh yes," he said hastily. "I have been in Manchukuo."

"They say there are no trees or rivers there...."

"Rubbish!" barked Sato, pursing his lips in imitation of his superior officer.

"But so many are returning...."

"Rubbish!" repeated Sato firmly. "Nothing is certain yet."

And he strode on importantly, oblivious of the fact that his puttees had come loose.

Chapter Three

He came to the detachment straight from the famous construction site No. 618, a preoccupied little chap wearing sneakers and a dust coat over a cheviot jacket. His eyes were bloodshot from lime dust and sleeplessness.

"Name?"

"Korzh!"

He said it with dignity, for the head of the plasterers' and housepainters' brigade was quite famous in his small way. At twenty-two he had painted four Volga bridges, two diesel boats, the façade of a Union House, six yachting clubs, the fence of the zoological gardens and at least a hundred roofs.

Having given his name, Korzh waited for a suitable response.

"So," said the border guard commander indifferently and ticked off the name on his list. "Now go and pick up your outfit."

And that was all. Korzh actually felt slighted.

"Does construction site No. 618 mean nothing to you?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not," replied the commander. "Can you blame me if there are 618 of them?"

That evening they shaved off Korzh's shock of hair and issued him a pair of boots that squeaked like a farm

waggon. He also got a crumpled army coat, a training rifle with a black butt, and an ancient sword.

Later on the squad commander, a plump-cheeked, painstaking chap, showed him how to sew a white collar on his tunic and to make his bed. He pommelled the fat sausage of a mattress with a will, spread out the blanket and then stepped back a bit with his head on one side to admire his handiwork.

"Like a negg," he said dreamily.

"Egg," corrected Korzh.

"That's right. Now look here, see that letter "F" up there, that stands for foot...."

"Feet, you mean," said Korzh.

The squad commander was annoyed. He put his heart and soul into his job and he did not like to be corrected by novices who didn't even know how to wear an army cap properly.

"Now, let's not have any arguments about it," he said sternly, "foot or feet, what's the difference? And now take this here tab and write your name on it and hang it up at the head of your cot."

Korzh obeyed unwillingly. It was all so different from the dashing life of the border guard he had imagined.

Korzh had expected to see Manchuria the first day, but the detachment was stationed a good 80 kilometres from the frontier in a village that might have been anywhere in the Ukraine, with its whitewashed huts, the ganders waddling about the streets and the wells with

their long, squeaking cranes; only here the roofs were corrugated zinc instead of thatch.

What young man of twenty-two does not dream of Chapayev? Korzh dreamed of cavalry attacks, of Budyonny charges, of pursuing the enemy and exchanging shots with him in the mountains. He had visualized himself astride a splendid Don sorrel, on a bright yellow saddle covered with a pale blue horsecloth with a star embroidered on it.

Instead he was taken into a classroom and given a seat at a desk. A young commander wearing leather-reinforced breeches thrust into a handsome pair of top boots drew on the blackboard something that looked like a barrel resting on four stools.

"Now, what have we here?" he demanded, throwing a stern look at the assembled men.

"A horse," someone ventured.

"Wrong. A horse is a civilian conception. What we have here is what you would call an army mount. In other words, a hippological object."

Presently in the centre of the barrel appeared what looked like an ace of hearts, two whisk brooms for lungs, and a stomach with a long pipe attached. The commander commenced to explain in great detail to these Ukrainian and Siberian farmers the functions of the alimentary canal of the horse.

Korzh could not stand it.

"When do we ride?" he inquired.

"Tomorrow."

After the lesson the squad commander came over to Korzh.

"If there's anything you don't understand you can ask me and I'll be only too glad to explain," he offered. "The horse, as such, is constructed quite simply."

"Well...."

But the commander was already drawing something on the blackboard.

That night as he tossed about on his sausage mattress Korzh had a terrible dream. He dreamed that he was the model for a lesson in equestrian science. Stark naked, he stood in the middle of the director's office at construction site No. 618, and little, baldheaded Brovman, poking him in the belly with a slide rule, was saying sternly: "What have we here? We have here the alimentary canal of an army mount."

Like many recruits, Korzh awoke before the bugle. He lay for a while thinking of the handsome sorrel, the clanking of spurs and the tall saddle of bright new leather, until an ear-splitting yell warned him that it was time to rise.

Disappointment awaited him at the riding school. Instead of the sorrel he got a fat, white gelding who carried recruits with as little enthusiasm as he hauled mail from the railway station. He had a pair of wicked eyes, grey eyelashes and furry, flabby lips tainted with green at the edges. As soon as this venerable steed was led out of the

stable he would at once break into a monotonous jog trot as though someone had wound him up. His head would sway from side to side in rhythm and from the depths of his fat belly a weird gurgling noise would issue.

Kaiser was the gelding's name, and the chief of the cavalry troop swore up and down that he had seen him at Peremyshl back in 1915.

The worst of it was that Kaiser had no saddle. Along with the other novices Korzh had to bounce up and down on the animal's back like a village lad, jump off, run alongside with his hand on the withers, jump on again, and so on *ad infinitum*.

The rifle range was Korzh's only consolation. Here the glamour of the frontier was strong. Pheasants called to one another in the thick yellow grass. There was a smell of decaying leaves, Russian leather and the sourish odour of powder smoke. It was warm in the sun but in the shade rime already crackled underfoot.

The shooting range was in a hollow, from which the low hills stretched in endless chains. The first row of hills was coloured a dirty yellow, the second somewhat lighter, the third was touched with blue, and beyond that rose mountains of the richest shades from indigo to ash.

It was pleasant to lie in the tall thick grass, to lean on your elbow and feel the cool, encouraging weight of the rifle as you raised it to your shoulder. When you fired you kept a firm grasp with the strap, the rifle butt making a groove for itself on your shoulder. Through the

slit of the sight you could see the neat little soldier in the round helmet with his rifle pointed at you.

The soldier stood bolt upright at first. But soon he dropped to one knee, and then he lay prone. Korzh rather liked that. Every day he carried on an unspoken conversation with the dummy.

"Would you like one right between the eyes?" he would ask.

The round eye of the enemy seemed to wink back at him.

"Laying low, eh? Well, you'd better watch out this time!"

The wind shook the target and the soldier grinned.

"Not enough? Well, take that!"

The conversation would end when his cartridges gave out.

"What are you mumbling about there, Korzh?" inquired the platoon commander. "Better save your breath."

But that was only for appearance's sake. For this particular rookie had a pair of strong arms and an eye like a Zeiss lens.

The cardboard soldier kept returning from the shooting range with bullet holes through his helmet or in his chin.

Life settled down to a dull routine. To Korzh the days were as like as bullets in an endless cartridge belt. Mounted drill, guard duty, the old training machine gun (by now they could put it together with their eyes closed),

copybooks, blackboards, the scraping of chalk, and, in the evenings, the rustle of book leaves, the strumming of a guitar or the click of dominoes—it was all much more like a model school than service in a border detachment. Even the barracks with its cream-coloured curtains, paper flowers on wooden stands and four huge rubber plants in the Lenin Corner looked anything but military.

Winter was approaching. In the morning the ground was frozen hard under the horses' hoofs. The oaks were shedding their last acorns. A bluish smoke hung over Georgievskaya Stanitsa, where the detachment was stationed, and fires roared in every stove. Korzh continued to remain in the training battalion. "We might as well be living in Penza," he wrote to his father. "We spend our time cleaning our boots, with the smell of boot polish in our nostrils instead of gunpowder. The next thing you know I'll be appointed to the commissary."

Yet on the border things were far from quiet.

Long garlands of lights twinkled in the southeast, where Mother and Iron hills reared steeply. The nights were filled with the impotent roar of trucks stuck in the swamps, and searchlights probed the bridges and the restless, humped earth.

The Cossack women who lived at the far end of the village pasted strips of paper on their windowpanes, for the frozen earth shook with explosions. The village girls shared roasted poppy seeds and tidbits of news with the recruits.

The year 1935 was in the offing. The scaffolding had not yet been taken down from the newly-fortified eastern zone but the concrete was hardening fast. As time slipped by the enemy began to show signs of nervousness. Every day brought fresh news from the outposts of border markers being dug up and diversionists caught.

Presently wounded began to arrive. For over a week now a Red Army man with a face as white as parchment had been seen in a wheel chair on the hospital grounds. One of his eyes was blue and bright, and the other was covered by a black patch. The girls passed bouquets of frozen mignonette and carnations to him through the fence.

Korzh, who had been tortured by curiosity for days, finally mustered up the courage to speak to him.

"Where were you wounded?" he asked.

"At Utin stream," the soldier replied in a low voice.

"Japs, eh?"

"No, our own . . . countrymen," he replied with a wry smile.

Spinning the wheels of his chair expertly with his bony hands, he rode along beside the fence, recalling border incidents for Korzh's edification.

. . . A bright-eyed soft-spoken young combine operator from Vladivostok had been found in possession of a pay-book in which were figures written in invisible ink.

. . . A half-blind old Chinese woman leading a calf had been picked up on the road from Manchuria by border

guards on the lookout for opium smugglers. It took them three days, however, before they discovered that what appeared to be a thick layer of caked mud on the animal's underbelly was actually opium, about two kilos in all.

...A hunter, carrying a rifle and a pair of pheasants at his belt, was found in possession of plans concealed inside false cartridges.

And, finally, a border detail came across three tipsy Cossacks carrying bundles tied to their sickles over their shoulders. They were singing a Cossack song popular on the Don when their grandfathers were young. The guards challenged them. Collective farmers, they said they were. "What brigade?" they were asked. The eldest answered for the others. "First Lyskov brigade," he replied. The guards happened to know that was the best brigade in the collective farm.

"What's the idea of roaming about along the border at this time of night?" they were asked. Winking to his comrades, the eldest, a foul-mouthed chap with a bull neck and the bearing of an old soldier, replied that they were going to do some reaping at the next farm.

The guards were about to let them go when the commander asked the Cossacks to show their papers. He had suddenly remembered the time when a man posing as a shepherd had turned out to have a stick of dynamite in his pocket.

"Papers?" said the eldest reaper blandly. "Sure, we've got papers."

He squatted to untie his calico bundle. Then he pulled out a grenade and hurled it with loud curses at the guards.

The three reapers turned out to be a Whiteguard band from the Manchurian town across the border.

Korzh wanted to ask what happened to the reapers, but at that moment an orderly emerged from the hospital and wheeled the patient back to his ward.

That conversation merely deepened Korzh's gloom. The placid, pot-bellied Kaiser seemed incredibly stupid, his morning cereal tasted bitter and his accordion sounded off key. It was quite clear to him that while he was spending his time aiming at a pasteboard dummy, somewhere near Utin stream things were happening.

That evening he sat down to write a thundering article for the wall newspaper. But before he had finished it he was summoned to headquarters by the commander of the training battalion.

"Well, my lad," the latter greeted him. "Accept my congratulations, etcetera. You're to report to Kazachka borderpost for active duty. You leave tomorrow. By the way, there's your chief."

Korzh glanced over toward the stove where an officer in mud-splashed soft leather boots was shaving. He had massive shoulders, a corn-coloured moustache, close-cropped head and a pair of piercing blue eyes that had evidently seen a great deal.

He stepped over to Korzh, his cape rustling.

"A Siberian?"

"Half-in-half."

The officer laughed.

"Good. We'll figure that out another time," he said in a hoarse bass voice. "You'd better go and get some sleep. We rise at 2:45." And he tapped the glass of his watchcase with a thick, tobacco-stained finger.

Chapter Four

The trucks moved over the plains. Sixteen Fiat trucks whined their way along, grinding painfully up the hillsides rusty with last year's grasses.

It was March, the month of the last frosts. The sun lit up the bare branches of the bushes and the low maples; the frozen earth shone like emery paper.

The chill vastness of the plains frightened the colonists. Rust-coloured in the centre and fading to a dusty mauve at the edges, the earth had been spreading out from the sides of the trucks for three days now.

Ash and rust—the two favourite colours of the Manchurian winter—had haunted the detachment all the way from the railhead.

Wrapped up in blankets and shawls, the colonists dozed most of the time, bumping up and down on their baskets and bundles. The soldiers sat stiffly erect in the open trucks with their rifles between their knees. The hoarfrost and the blue ice on the rivers were dazzlingly bright and the sharp wind made their eyes water. Many of the

soldiers had put on silk masks to protect their noses and cheekbones. The effect was sinister.

Lieutenant Amakasu's light-grey Fiat rolled along at the head of the column, the canvas top demonstratively open.

Amakasu disdained even to raise his warm collar of monkey fur. He sat bolt upright with his hands resting on the hilt of his sabre, the very personification of Japanese army morale. The whitened tip of his nose and frosted moustache were visible from beneath his fur cap.

The men rode in silence. Three sounds dominated the stillness: the monotonous drone of the engines, the crackling of the frozen grass and the thumping of soldiers' boots. Chilled to the bone, the riflemen stamped their feet on the floor of the trucks for all they were worth. When the stamping grew particularly violent Amakasu would stop the leading trucks, order the soldiers and colonists out and make them run.

It was a fantastic sight: one hundred and fifty men wearing shawls and hats, rubber capes, coarse sweaters, coats or pea jackets, and rubber boots or straw gaiters, running up and down the hills with the soldiers in fur-trimmed caps and short fur jackets after them.

Mr. Amakasu himself, his skinny legs encased in light polished boots, ran in front of the steam-enveloped column, holding his swaying sabre and revolver.

The gallant air of the lieutenant and his seeming indifference to the frost inspirited the drooping colonists.

There was a good deal of laughter, backslapping and wisecracking. But as soon as the trucks were on their way again the animation subsided.

They sped past Shansi and Hai-kung, with their low clay buildings and lean, hungry curs roaming the streets, crossed the ice-covered Hayar River and turned west, where there was to be land for the settlers and a life of adventure and exploits for the soldiers.

... Back in Osaka, Sato, at the sergeant major's advice, had bought a diary, a little book with a dark green binding and the picture of a young girl with her finger to her lips on the cover. In this book he painstakingly jotted down his impressions of the journey. So far his entries had been anything but exciting:

"February 22. Covered 110 km. Were issued cigarettes and one tumbler of sake. The sergeant major inspected our feet. The Chinese word for tobacco is *hun-yen.*

"February 23. Covered 116 km. The lieutenant ordered us to set fire to the tall millet. Miyako was reprimanded for claiming to have seen bandits during the night.... The Chinese for cucumber is *hun-ha.* Cabbage is *bai-dza.* Received *miso** and four candies each.... It's cold.

"February 24. Made 103 km. today. Ran over a dog. When your fingers swell up they should be bathed in hot water. The sergeant major said that cowardice is an in-

* Bean porridge.

born trait of the Manchurians. Pepper is *linziau*. Melon—*siang-hua*. This morning we had a blowout."

The detachment had only one adventure en route to Yang-chen.

It was a bright, windy day. Around noon the column crossed the plateau and entered a wood. The detachment had spread out to such an extent that while the first trucks were already bumping over the knotty paths in the wood the rear car was still crossing open country.

Suddenly a cloud of dust rose on the plains. Three huge brown spouts appeared on the horizon. They swayed back and forth for a while, now moving together, now separating, and looking for all the world like three giant spyglasses examining the plains. Then by one accord they moved north.

The driver of the rear car stepped on the gas. The car was on the very fringe of the wood when a cloud of dust, snow and dry grass hit the soldiers. The trees began to sway overhead and the trunks creaked ominously. The wood was filled with a loud roar. Clouds of leaves were torn off the ground and whirled skywards. Several soldiers' helmets flew up.

Some invisible gigantic rake seemed to be combing the forest. The maples swayed from side to side as though trying to decide which way to fall. Suddenly one of the trees crashed, just missing a truckload of machine-gunners.

The officers ordered soldiers and passengers to dismount and clear the road. By that time the whirling spouts

of grass, dust and leaves were already some distance away. Ten soldiers with difficulty hauled the felled tree to the side of the road.

Soon the dust settled and it grew visibly lighter in the wood. The crowns of the maples still trembled, but below everything was quiet. The frightened colonists still clung to their wind-torn mats.

The soldiers, superstitious as all peasants, whispered among themselves as they gazed in the wake of the sand spouts. Sato pulled out his pocket compass and tapped on the glass. The blue arrow trembled and stood still. The tornado was heading northeast.

"To the gates of hell," said Tarada in a low voice.

"That's a sure sign of a drought."

"Bad beginning!"

"Yes.... And if I'm not mistaken, it's Friday today," remarked Sato in alarm.

"Silence!" barked Corporal Akita, who was not feeling so good himself.

Presently they were driving over the plains again. There was no sign of the tornado. They had driven a good five kilometres when suddenly out of the clouds from a tremendous height fell a shower of cold maple leaves that had been whirled away by the tornado.

To mitigate the unpleasant effect of the incident, the lieutenant ordered an issue of two glasses of sake per man.

* * *

The detachment moved slowly northward. It was no easy matter to reach the deserted paradise whose virtues the newspapers had been extolling for more than two years. Two young soldiers had died of beri-beri en route to Seishin, several of the southerners had frozen their feet, and a taciturn machine-gunner named Tsugamo had been sentenced to a term on the islands after the last examination of the soldiers' diaries.

Sergeant Major Ogawa announced the deplorable incident at the evening roll call.

"With the soil of Yamato gone from under his feet, Private Second Class Tsugamo has lost heart and in a fit of nostalgia has returned to the barracks of the sixth regiment."

Homesick for Yamato! Sato simply could not understand it! He had a good laugh as he recalled the dismal Tsugamo.

How could anyone long for miserable plaice and dirty barley when here they were getting *miso*, rice, sugar and vegetables every day, and sweets and sake on holidays? Sato looked down proudly at his new fur coat lined with white sheepskin, at his felt boots and woollen gloves. Why, the tunic with the marvellous bronze buttons, the stiff collar and the red shoulder straps was a joy in itself. And what about the roomy kitbag filled with spare shoes, underwear, bullets and hardtack, a splendid bag that smelt gloriously of fresh leather and polish.... And the smooth aluminium messtin. And the medicine case. No, a

fellow had to be a dirty pig like Tsugamo to be dissatisfied after all that!

Sato's cheeks were fairly bursting with contentment. He was full, grateful and happy. Not once had he had to pry open a can of goose fat or rub alcohol on frost-bitten fingers. The thick sweater, his own hot blood and the talisman made of a rayfish tail afforded him reliable protection from frost and wind. At first glance the talisman might not seem particularly impressive, but the fortune-teller was so insistent that Sato had been obliged to hand over the cash. He had paid three yen for the fuzzy little bag and several valuable bits of advice. He was warned to beware of Fridays, not to sleep with cross-eyed women and to expect misfortune in his forty-third year.

Sato was just going on for twenty-two. Bouncing up and down on the truck seat he gazed confidently over the plains. To Sato, accustomed to the Hokkaido coast with nets drying and people wishing you "*konnitsi-wa*"* at every step, the land here seemed vast and empty. The only reminder of life were the occasional ox carts that trundled along by the side of the road. The Manchurian huts were empty, the parchment on the windows torn and the stoves cold. Heaps of rags and paper lay on the clay floors. Occasionally they came across corpses, black, dusty corpses that had stiffened in incredible positions. Wheels lay on the ground outside deserted smithies. The bellows and the

* Good day.

iron had been carried off to the mountains, where home-made sabres and pikes were being forged.

On several occasions the column had to spend the night in deserted villages. These were brief halts of unrelieved dullness, as unexciting as the worn mats on which the soldiers slept. The doctor would begin by testing the water in the wells and making a yellow chalk mark on the huts unfit for habitation, after which the detachment would retire for the night.

There were no lights except for the flame in the low stoves lighting up the cropped skulls of the soldiers and their hands reaching out hungrily for the warmth. From a distance the dark, silent huts with the smoke and sparks issuing from the chimneys presented a weird spectacle.

Searching in one of these villages, Sato's detachment came across an old woman. Dishevelled and grimy, wearing a pair of quilted army trousers, she was squatting beside a pot and did not even turn round when the lieutenant entered the hut accompanied by an interpreter and soldiers.

"Get up!" ordered Sato. The old woman did not stir.

In a fit of soldiery zeal Sato struck the old hag with his rifle, for which he was reprimanded by the lieutenant.

"That's enough," said Amakasu. "You are too zealous."

"Yes, sir."

"Moreover you are a fool. It is necessary to show the population their mistakes and to imbue them with respect for the imperial army. Mr. Mito, please tell this woman that I condemn the behaviour of this soldier."

But this magnanimous remark had no effect on the woman either. She continued to sit on her haunches, stirring some sticky mass with a spoon. Assuming her to be hard of hearing, the interpreter leaned over and shouted in her ear:

"The lieutenant condemns the soldier's behaviour!"

The old woman slowly turned her head and stared at the lieutenant's boots as though fascinated by their gleam.

"Son," she said in a dead voice.

Lieutenant Amakasu was puzzled. He squatted opposite the old woman and commenced patiently to explain why the population had been wrong to take to the hills. The lieutenant was a good talker. Without raising his voice or uttering any threats he made it clear that the villagers had acted foolishly, and he spoke of the great mission of the imperial army. Six soldiers and a corporal listened with reverential awe to the lieutenant's fine speech.

Wishing to give his subordinates an object lesson in politeness, Amakasu addressed the filthy old crone in his most courteous manner.

"Patience and prudence are the best qualities a soil tiller can possess," he said. "May your hearth never grow cold."

With these words the lieutenant rose, glancing curiously into the steaming pot.

"Son," repeated the old crone.

"There, there," the lieutenant said soothingly, "you shall see better times."

A flicker of something like curiosity passed over the wrinkled features of the old Chinese woman. Her lips spread, and before the interpreter could complete the phrase she had seized the pot with her swarthy hands and splashed the brew over Amakasu.

They did not shoot her, although the lieutenant's new uniform was completely ruined. They merely beat her with ramrods.

She learned her lesson. In the morning when the corporal washed himself she held the jug of water for him. She stood with her back bent and stared dry-eyed at the thick bull neck, the large ears and the stream of water. Her hands trembled with the weight of the jug.

After he had washed, the corporal generously thrust the bit of soap into her hand.

An hour later the wind and the truck engines struck up their monotonous drone once more. Again the frozen earth and the slanting hills sped by unendingly. Now and again great balls of tumbleweed would leap across the road, and Sato would follow them curiously with his eyes as the wind drove them over the plains. There was something uncanny about those great tufts of grass bounding over the humped earth.

The thermometre stood at minus 30° Centigrade. The farther north the detachment advanced the brighter gleamed the hoarfrost and the severer the cold. Many of the men had donned goggles. The dark glasses and frames gave them the appearance of some sinister night birds.

Carts with huge nail-studded wheels began to appear more and more frequently. Bits of rags were now lying on the road. At last, just outside Tsing-kiang, in a swampy valley overgrown with sword lilies, they met their first Manchurians.

The tents of a sapper battalion gleamed white on the bank of a stream. More than a thousand peasants drafted for road work were building a tall embankment on whose crest a steamroller moved. The words "peace, labour and prosperity" were inscribed in red brick on the finished section.

The helpless appearance of the diggers, their dark, dejected faces and filthy clothing offered complete confirmation of what Sergeant Major Ogawa had said about the inferiority of the Manchurians.

At sight of the detachment the peasants lowered their spades and hurriedly cleared a narrow passage for the column to pass. Not one of them, however, responded to the sergeant major's greeting.

"They must be deaf," jeered Tarada.

"Moles, that's what they are!"

"Look at the mug on that one!"

"A typical bandit!"

"Scum!"

Taking advantage of the benevolent smile on the face of the sergeant major, the company wags opened a rapid fire of wisecracks at the silent row of Manchurians. Each joke brought a roar of laughter. It was pleasant to loosen up after the oppressive silence of the plains.

Even Sato, the sluggard, could not contain himself.

"Hallo there, you dung worms!" he yelled.

The column came to a halt beside the stream. The order was given to water the engines.

Sato and Kondo were the first to snatch up canvas pails and slide down the bank onto the ice. The stream was frozen solid. The wind had blown off the snow and the stream made a smooth blue path pointing southward. The soldiers ran over the ice, sliding and falling.

It was a jolly excursion. Fish stood motionless in the light, bubbly depths. Sato stamped his foot but the fish did not move: they had frozen into the ice. He took out his knife and chopped out a chunk of ice with a fish. It was a flat one with sharp red fins and a golden belly. After a bit of scouting they found a deeper spot where the water had not frozen, and here they filled their pails.

A company of sappers was working near the settlement. A buzz saw powered by an automobile engine was in action. The saw was tended by soldiers with ashen cheeks and eyebrows and lashes grey from the frost.

Sato shared cigarettes with one of the sappers, a real

soldier who had seen plenty of action. He was a lively fellow with a jolly, ruddy countenance and a voice that hissed like a burst water pipe.

"So you're from Hokkaido?" asked the sapper, emitting the words with an effort. "They say there's trouble in Saporro.... Barley has dropped another two yen."

"I don't know," said Sato. "Is it always as cold as this up here?"

"Always. Two yen per *koku.** So you haven't heard anything about the barley?"

"No. Four of our fellows had their feet frostbitten."

"Yes, it's cold, damned cold," agreed the sapper, stamping his feet. "See those girders? That's our seventeenth bridge. The maple wood here is like iron.... We changed two saws this morning. So you're bound for Tsing-kiang?"

"We don't know anything."

"Now, now.... It's easy to see you're new to the game. There's nothing secret about trifles like that."

"I hear the crops are good around here," remarked Sato evasively.

"Rot! It's a paradise for convicts."

While they were talking a thin coating of ice had formed on the water in the canvas pail. An impatient honking came from the opposite bank.

"Watch out for your ears," hissed the sapper in parting.

* Slightly more than five bushels.

But Sato did not hear him. With his pail in one hand and his frozen fish in the other he raced over the bubbly blue ice to the waiting truck.

They had travelled another fifty kilometres when suddenly all the trucks began to honk in chorus. Two towers were visible beyond a swampy field ahead of them. A low, clay, buttressed wall encirled the town buildings.

A small bell clanged tonelessly. Coloured tassels and paper balloons swayed in the streets. From every chimney rose a column of blue smoke, reminding the travellers of warm fires and hot food. A town, warm and throbbing with life.

The colonists, swathed in blankets and varicoloured shawls, peeped over the sides of the trucks.

"*Ano-ne*!" cried Ogawa. "Long live Tsing-kiang!"

A few hoarse voices echoed his call uncertainly.

Cavalrymen wearing fur-trimmed helmets were already galloping out of the city gates to meet them.

Chapter Five

After his interminable journeys and noisy construction jobs, the Kazachka borderpost seemed amazingly quiet to Korzh. The low building of oak logs stood in a hollow, and you could drive right up to it without noticing its dark roof, the radio antenna, or the fence dotted with black and yellow daubs of camouflage paint.

Everything was silent here. The horses did not neigh, the dogs did not bark, boots did not squeak. Red Army men going off on mounted patrol wrapped rags around their horses' hoofs; those who went on foot wore soft leather boots.

There was no borderline between day and night at the post: men went to bed when the roosters crowed and woke up with the evening sun streaming into the windows; they cleaned their boots at midnight and washed at midday.

... Only three days had passed since Korzh's name had first been shouted at morning roll call, but to the men and their commander it seemed they had known that merry countenance and those restless freckled hands all their lives. Korzh had travelled quite extensively and had no doubt seen more than a whole platoon of Red Army men had. The mere mention of some region, city or new construction job invariably had him chiming into the conversation.

He knew that in Bobriki they had built a cinema that "beat the Moscow cinemas hollow," that Taganrog stood on a hill, and that the water in the Tiflis bathhouses smelt of sulphur. He could tell you how many days it took to travel by boat from Kazan to Astrakhan, what a blast furnace looked like and what colour the Kremlin palace was painted. Korzh brought to the borderpost a host of pithy expressions, funny stories, songs, and, what is most important, a real honest-to-goodness chromatic accordion

with powerful bellows, a leather strap with a green lining, and with enough mother-of-pearl buttons for a hundred Ukrainian shirts.

On the evening of his arrival Korzh took the accordion out of its case and placed it on the table in front of the men.

"Anyone like to try it?" he offered casually.

The men looked silently from the accordion to the wide-mouthed newcomer. The black varnish and shining nickel of the instrument dazzled them. It seemed a sacrilege to touch its gleaming keys.

It was the cook, a little bowlegged chap with oriental features, who broke the silence with a cough. He was the song leader and the post's musician.

"May I?" he inquired respectfully. "Be back in just a minute."

He ran over to the sink and washed his hands carefully. Then he took up the instrument, tenderly placing it on his knees.

"Now, hold everything!" said Squad Commander Garmiz.

"Let's have *Oi, za gaem, gaem.*"*

"No, *Polka.*"

But no sound came from the accordion. The cook was bewildered. His hands, accustomed to the smaller Tula instrument, went numb in contact with the mother-of-pearl

* A popular Ukrainian song.

keys. Pressing the buttons soundlessly, he took off the strap and gazed sadly at his stubby red fingers.

"Sorry," he said.

The accordion sighed audibly.

Then Korzh began to play. From the very first vibrant chord it was clear that the instrument was in the hands of its master.

A familiar Hungarian dance tune tripped lightly over the floormats with a practised toe. Korzh played with accustomed ease. He sat with his head on one side, twitching his eyebrows as though rather surprised himself at the pure melody that flowed from under his fingers. The instrument scarcely breathed, yet the treble came to the aid of the lone alto and now and then a soft bass punctuated the rhythm.

The melody moved with a slow grace. From Korzh's expression it was clear that the real thing was yet to come. His eyebrows rose and stood still, his small, strong nostrils dilated. With a deft movement he adjusted the strap. The next moment everything gay, whimsical and sonorous inherent in the accordion burst forth, filling the barracks with a riot of sound. Young virgin voices soared, but the violins and flutes rose higher still. Bows struck the double basses, domras rang out, bells sounded, and guitars strummed in unison; the octaves spread a thick carpet of music beneath the feet of the dancers, and a tambourine, gay, silly thing, tripped lightly around the circle in the wake of the melody.

Korzh sat motionless. Only his restless fingers, peppered with freckles, kept up their facile movement over the keys.

Suddenly someone let out a yell:

"The lamp!"

A spiral of black smoke had risen to the ceiling, sending a shower of black soot over the room. The music broke off. Garmiz grumblingly began covering the table with sheets of newspaper.

"Fine playing," said the cook respectfully. There was a note of wistfulness in his voice, for he secretly envied the musician.

Everyone gazed with awe at the sturdy young rookie as he sat there nonchalantly fingering the keys. He had the simple, good-natured features of a village lad, but there was a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Nugis, a huge, silent Latvian, stroked the accordion.

"Must have cost a pretty penny!" he observed.

The musician laughed.

"I couldn't say. It was presented to me."

And he showed them the silver plate with the inscription on the case of the accordion.

* * *

It was February, the only winter month when the snow leaves no footprints. The wind too seemed to be in league with the border jumpers. It swept everything away: skis, matches, cigarette butts and remains of fires; it hid the

smell of sheepskin, boot leather and tobacco among the soft, snowy mass.

This was a difficult sector to guard. The time when smugglers would risk their lives for a dozen pairs of stockings or some liquor was past. Nowadays smuggling was merely used as camouflage. The men who tried to cross the border at this period were hardbitten characters, trained in the Doihara* school, who could skilfully lie or keep their counsel when cross-examined. They carried no papers of any kind and were unarmed.

Mounted patrols, border guards with trained police dogs, machine-gunners, and snipers indefatigably combed the gullies, oak copses and brush that stretched along the border.

An old woman who claimed to be on her way to "confess" to a priest on the other side of the frontier was detained. She carried a long list of the departed to be mentioned in her prayers—and between the names of the old lady's relatives Dubakh found the names of commanders of the fortified zone written in invisible ink.

They brought in a deaf-mute Korean wearing a wristwatch with a remarkably devised camera fitted into it.

They shot down a pigeon with a note tied to its leg which read: "Peter will come on Saturday. Bring cigarettes."

Dubakh himself donned a white camouflage cape and

* Notorious Japanese secret agent in Manchuria.

went out to meet the guest. He spent two nights with his men in ambush.

"Peter" did not come on Saturday. But on Monday, during a heavy snowstorm, shooting broke out in the neighbouring Chinese town of Tsing-kiang. The following dawn Squad Commander Garmiz detained two partisans at border marker No. 17 who had escaped from a Manchurian jail. Both had had their ears cut off.

Nugis with his famous dog Rex did the best work of all. This silent man with the shoulders of a professional wrestler and a schoolgirl complexion had brought thirty-seven border violators to the station that winter without firing a single shot.

On several occasions Korzh had convoyed prisoners. They were a motley crowd: greengrocers, poppy growers, deserters from the Tsing-kiang garrison, relatives of Cossacks on the other side of the frontier and bandits—they were all border violators. Ever since the arrival of the first groups of Japanese colonists, more and more Manchurian farmers were coming over. In search of work and peace, they crossed the frontier in groups, and their broad, roughened hands were more eloquent than any documents of identification they could show. Nevertheless it was hard to distinguish friends from enemies. That was up to the chiefs at the post.

Korzh had not yet been sent out on detail. He was already accustomed to throwing off blanket and sleep in one bound at the first sound of the alarm signal, could as-

semble a machine gun with his eyes closed and was quite a good seat in the saddle. But the chief seemed in no hurry to use him.

Before becoming a commander Dubakh had been a locomotive engineer for years. And he had learned the iron rule of the engine-driver never to do anything in haste. He believed in working up speed gradually, and he trained the rookies thoroughly. He taught them to shoot without missing, to find their way by the stars, to commit to memory every stone, every bush, every tree stump in the area they would have to guard for the next three years.

He developed their powers of observation, he taught them to be suspicious of everything and everybody they encountered in the forbidden zone.

One day Dubakh showed his trainees a cigarette stub picked up in the woods by a scout detail.

"What is this?" he asked Korzh.

"A butt!"

"Is that all? Examine it carefully and tell me what you see."

Korzh scrutinized the stub. It was damp and yellow and bore the gilded trademark: "Lopato Bros. Harbin."

"A Chinese stub, sir!" Korzh reported proudly.

Dubakh smiled.

"That's too obvious, my friend. This butt tells us much more than that."

Dubakh then proceeded to deliver a ten-minute lec-

ture on the cigarette end. To begin with, the smoker had crossed the border some time ago, since now the butt was yellow. He had evidently come from the Manchurian side, since no one on our side smoked Harbin cigarettes. He must have crossed over in the daytime, because only a madman would have risked lighting a cigarette at night. He was either not a very experienced hand at the game or else extremely careless, otherwise he would have hidden the butt. He had evidently been interrupted, because the cigarette was only half smoked. Moreover, he had used a holder with a very narrow opening, judging by the crumpled state of the tip.

"Learn to observe," said Dubakh as he put the butt away in a box. "Notice everything. Listen to the woodpecker's call, take note of when the Japanese change their sentries, find out where you can ford the Pachiheza. Keep your eyes open and be on your guard. Never take anything for granted."

Like all chiefs, Dubakh was both a commander and teacher. He used the same red pencil to mark the bullet holes on the target and to correct the mistakes the recruits made in dictation exercises.

The young soldier had to learn so many things. He had to know how the wind affects the flight of a bullet and what kind of a harvest they had in the Kuban this year; how many bullets a minute a Degtyaryov machine gun fires

and how Japanese infantry tactics differ from ours; what is meant by ballistics, how a gas mask filter is made, how hills and forests are designated on a map, how many ribs a horse has, the functions of the liver and how to bandage a shin.

They had to know a great deal; more, perhaps, than some commanders during the Civil War. Yet in Dubakh's opinion something was lacking in these studies.

He decided to introduce a "Book of Heroes," a detailed chronicle of exploits accomplished by Soviet patriots.

After considerable search in the town he found a huge album with a reproduction of the famous Shishkin bear painting on the cover. In this album he pasted newspaper clippings and the portraits of heroes.

The result was a unique textbook of the courage and ingenuity of hundreds of little-known Soviet men and women. There was no particular system to the album. A woman doctor who had injected herself with plague germs for experimental purposes shared a page with the participants in an ascent to the stratosphere. Girl skiers rubbed shoulders with a student who had rescued a woman from a fire; gold seekers who had unearthed a huge nugget were pasted side by side with a shepherd who had fought a pack of wolves to save his flock. There were airmen who had flown a million kilometres, the army's best snipers, a professor who had introduced a method of painless childbirth, a Young Pioneer who had detained

a bandit, Soviet steelmakers, musicians, tankmen, actors, firemen, scientists....

The book told the men all about Kokkinaki,* Demchenko,** Babochkin,*** Lysenko**** and Botvinnik.***** It was quoted and read aloud every evening.

Dubakh was extremely proud of his idea. In all earnestness he assured the commandant of the sector that since the advent of the "Book of Heroes" marksmanship had noticeably improved.

* * *

Spring was approaching. The snow had melted but the March ice still lay dark in the hollows. The watchdogs whimpered. Smoke crawled from the direction of Tsingkiang, where Japanese colonists were burning the tall Manchurian millet.

* V. K. Kokkinaki—Hero of the Soviet Union and famous test pilot. He established six world records for altitude flights with and without payload.

** Maria Demchenko—field crew leader on a Kiev Region (Ukraine) collective farm who achieved the outstanding harvest yield of 50 metric tons of sugar-beet per hectare. She was elected Deputy to the Supreme Soviet.

*** B. A. Babochkin—popular Soviet cinema actor best known for his role of Chapayev in the film of the same name. He is a Stalin Prize winner.

**** Trofim D. Lysenko—well-known Soviet selectionist, author of the theory of plant development by stages and of methods for the vernalization of spring and winter wheat, potatoes and other crops to increase yields. He is a Member of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R.

***** Mikhail Botvinnik- chess champion of the U.S.S.R.

Dubakh went about gloomily, sniffing the air as though trying to scent something.

For more than two months now there had been a loophole on the sector. Some cautious and experienced border jumper who knew the locality thoroughly was leading the border guards by the nose. Dubakh strengthened the scout details, the mounted patrols, ambushes and forest search parties, but all in vain. They tried the dogs, but even Rex, who had unravelled many a complex knot in his time, sneezed confusedly as he sniffed the grass. Pepper and snuff spilled by the border jumpers stung the dog's nostrils.

As a last resort they strung up bells on thin wires. For six nights they listened carefully, but there was no sound. Every day the phone rang, and each time the chief inquired dryly: "Well?" That "well" was like a knife-thrust for Dubakh. He began to look haggard and worn; he was absent for days at a time in the forest, and when he returned he dropped exhausted onto his couch. He resumed his old frontline habit of going to bed without undressing. His six-year-old daughter Ilka stared in fright at her father's knotted hands as he slept. They were so heavy and still that Ilka thought her father would never wake. But even at the chirp of a cricket Dubakh would raise his heavy hand without opening his eyes and say: "Dubakh speaking."

The telephone stood beside his bed. Dubakh was slightly deaf but was ashamed to admit it. In damp weather

his deafness asserted itself, and then he would take the phone to bed with him and fall asleep with the receiver at his ear.

The telephone line crossed the taiga. Birds perched on the wires, squirrels tried them with their teeth, and thunderstorms would fill the line with hissing and crackling. The receiver conscientiously registered all these noises in the chief's ear while he tossed and muttered in fitful slumber.

... Ever since Ilka first began opening the front door by herself Dubakh had lost all control over his little daughter.

She was forever roaming about the barracks. The drying room and the kitchen were her favourite haunts. There was always such a lovely smell of tobacco, leather and smoke in the drying room, where huge swamp boots, damp greatcoats and hooded capes (which made such a splendid place to hide from father) hung in rows. There the Red Army men would sit on a low bench, smoking and talking about a place called Barabinsk and telling all sorts of stories that thrilled Ilka although she understood very little of what was said.

The kitchen was even more exciting. The iron stove door was always ruddy from the heat, the lids were forever dancing on the large green pots. If Ilka went close to the stove, the pots would say "Pfff" to her.

The cook was also somehow different, not like the other men. He was only a little taller than Ilka, his legs

were crooked, he had prominent cheekbones and the whites of his eyes were pink from the heat. Instead of the usual green cap and greatcoat he wore a funny white cap and an apron in the pockets of which you could always find some green peas and a mouth organ.

The cook's name was Belik. Ilka liked him for the mouth organ and for his interesting stories. Belik knew everything; he knew how the dogs and woodpeckers talk, how many years a pike lives, why the telephone has a handle to it, whether a bullet can fly to the moon and why toadstools have spots on top.

What's more, he could play the Aviators' March on the mouth organ, make kites, do amusing tricks with a five-kopeck piece and predict the weather.

He knew everything. When Ilka brought some cold transparent berries on thin stalks from the forest he told her sternly to throw them away. They were fish eyes, he said.

He could not explain how fish eyes came to be in the forest, but Ilka believed in her friend implicitly.

One day in April when the ferns had shot their firm fronds out of the warmed earth, it suddenly turned cold again. A piercing wind broke through to the hollow where the borderpost stood. The leaves on the willows shivered and shook and Ilka's father told her to put on her coat. Ilka hated wearing a coat. Alarmed and frightened, she ran to the cook.

"Belik," she demanded. "Is it winter again?"

"No, lass," the cook replied with a laugh. "It's only the oaks putting out their leaves. Tonight you can hear the buds popping."

That night Ilka ran outside in her stockinged feet. The oaks stood beyond the river, gnarled and black, their bare arms stretched out to the moon. Next to them gleamed the slender branches of willows. Maples sheltered the lilacs and hazel trees from the chill of the night. Green shoots were breaking through everywhere; even the cork tree had shot forth a few sharp-pointed leaves. Only the oaks stubbornly pretended not to notice the grass that tickled their roots.

Ilka listened carefully for a long while. But no sound came from the oaks. They were so stubborn that Ilka's feet began to get cold. But she waited and at last her vigil was rewarded by a faint sound like the patter of raindrops. The sound was repeated. Suppressing her excitement, Ilka ran down to the river. She ran over to the thickest and most stubborn of all the oaks and pressed her ear to the rough bark. The tree was silent. The sound came from another quarter. It was made by birch sap dripping into a tin can Belik had hung up.

But the oaks refused to pop, and Ilka went back to bed disappointed. Her stockings were wet and she sneezed a long time before she fell asleep. In the morning she ran down to the oak again: sure enough, it was covered with tiny leaves that had burst through their pink buds. Ilka nearly wept with chagrin. The oak had outwitted her.

Evidently the buds had popped while she was in bed sneezing. She felt slightly better when Belik told her that oak buds pop only once in ninety-two years.

Chapter Six

"Some concert!" said Korzh, staring down in despair at his boots. That fresh leather was the very devil! It sang, it squeaked, it groaned, it creaked, announcing the detail's approach over the whole frontier. Five kilometres of uninterrupted pig squeak! No amount of grease or fish oil could soften the temperamental leather.

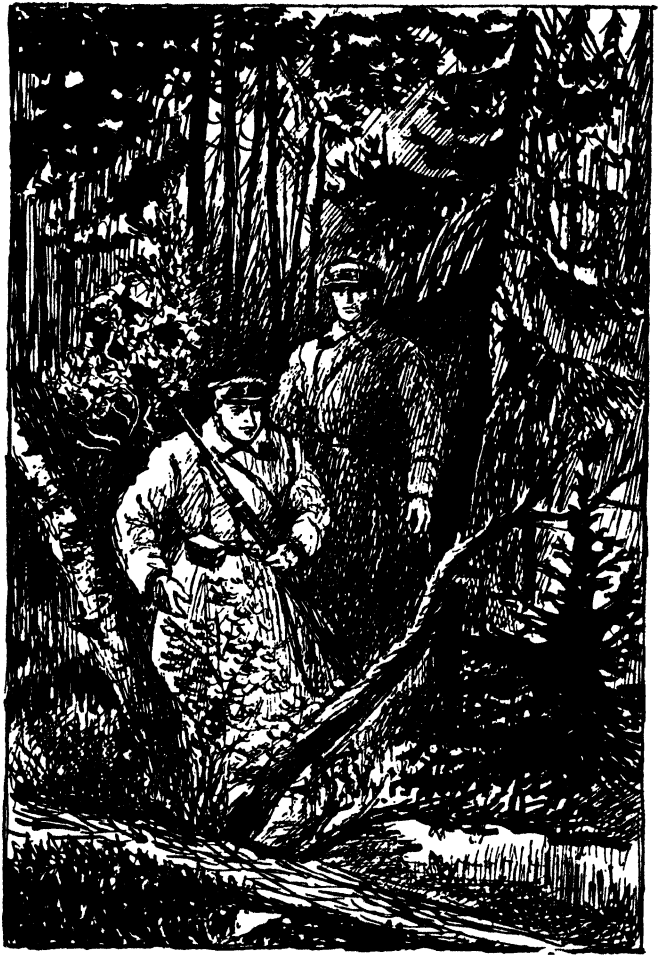
They stopped. Korzh was afraid to move. But they had to hurry, for the sun was already low.

"Try walking on your toes," suggested Nugis.

He stood beside Korzh, a thoughtful, grey-eyed giant in shabby soft leather boots, holding the dog by the muzzle. Rex whined nervously. The pungent odour of the leather stung his nostrils.

Korzh started forward on his toes, stretching out his arms to balance himself. But the squeaking continued, drowning out all other sounds. Korzh flushed with annoyance. He had been prepared for anything: frightened whispers, grenade explosions, a bullet in the back, a Japanese scout landing from the skies—anything but this irritating, ceaseless squeak.

Korzh envied Nugis his crumpled coat, his soft boots, even his hollow voice. This reserved man and everything



about him seem to fit perfectly into his environment. Although he kept his holster unfastened, Nugis almost never fired while on the border. He was as sparing of bullets as of words.

In silence they crossed the stream over a log, passed through a rice field and entered a gully that was so deep and so narrow that they saw their first star while it was still daylight. Then they made their way cautiously through a stretch of driftwood, turned off into the old channel of the Pachiheza and began to climb up, stepping from stone to stone.

"Remember the landmarks," said Nugis.

There was plenty to remember. Korzh was dizzy from trying to make note of all the tree stumps, the brooks, footpaths and twin birches and boulders that all looked exactly alike. Now and then they came across foxholes covered over with turf and twigs and flooded with spring water. In one of them they found a fragment of an ammunition crate and a piece of bandage.

The path wound up a hill that stood like a broad Cossack saddle in the midst of the oak woods. Two hollows skirted the flanks of the hill and merged in a narrow ravine that ran southward.

Keeping to the shadow of the thickets, they descended the hill on the other side, skirted the salt marshes covered with faded grass that looked like mould, and took up positions behind fallen trees within twenty metres of the border.

Beyond the ravine in the middle of a hilly field stood a town of clay buildings. Korzh had never seen anything like it before. The wind chased bits of straw through the filthy streets, and smoke rose from many braziers. A vegetable huckster staggered along, weighed down by his baskets. Beside a well a man lay face down, his arms outstretched; from a distance you could not tell whether he was dead or drunk. Occasionally a few clumsy carts with huge wheels trundled by. A Chinese wearing quilted trousers sat outside the entrance to a tavern; a large paper tulip flapped in the wind above his head.

A strong odour of bean oil, garlic and urine was wafted from across the stream. The clay fortress reeked of poverty, squalor and the dreariness of an old Manchurian province. There was no sign here of fresh lumber, no neat piles of red brick, no transparent piles of metal reinforcing. Korzh looked down at the Manchurian town from the height of his twenty-two years.

"Some chicken-coop!" he ejaculated with scorn.

"That's Tsing-kiang," said Nugis. "An important town—two battalions."

"A miserable hole, if you ask me."

"Maybe, but it has a night life—of a special kind."

A bugle suddenly rent the air. Nugis pulled out his watch.

"An alarm! See, I'm making note of the time."

Soldiers came running out of the adobe barracks toward the stables. The slim-legged, boyish-looking caval-

rymen hastily strapped bundles of pressed hay, thermos flasks and machine-gun magazines onto the saddles. All the soldiers wore wide fur ear muffs, grey gloves and grey gaiters that covered the toes of their boots.

An officer, distinguishable from the soldiers only by the monkey fur collar on his jacket and his shining boots, waved his hand—evidently issuing some command—and the small detachment set off at a trot through the clay gates to disappear soon in the yellowish haze beyond the hills.

"Well, there'll be a rush tomorrow," observed Nugis. "They're behind time again."

"Tactical exercises?"

"Tactical nothing! Yesterday they found the body of a colonist in a well."

Crouching low among the bushes, they moved along another half a kilometre and dropped down in the cold wet grass. The sky had acquired a greenish, murky hue and seemed closer to the earth than before. This was the mysterious hour of twilight, the brief period of silent watchfulness that separates evening from night just as the narrow strip of the horizon separates the earth from the sky. The hills were already mere silhouettes, but the treetops had not yet lost their soft, deep shadows.

A bittern was the first to break the silence. In a hollow voice that seemed to issue from the bowels of the earth it greeted the first star. And at once from all the marshes

for miles around the frogs chorused their response. Basking blissfully in the bog water, they seemed to have been awaiting the signal, and a triumphant batrachian symphony echoed over the rice fields.

A ringtail flew over the water, shaking its round, feline head, while a marmot struggled in its claws.

A strange sensation of depression and uneasiness seized Korzh. Until now everything had been so calm and clear: the water had glistened, a white pebble had lain on the path and the maple leaves had swayed in the breeze. Now even the neighbouring bush seemed to live a mysterious double life. Everything rustled, whispered, glided and crept; even the stream seemed to be murmuring in Korean. The dog's honest eyes, the stars and his watch dial were all that was clear and tangible in this shadowy world.

Korzh twisted his head this way and that until he felt dizzy. He was tense and alert. Like all novices he made a host of needless movements: he shifted his rifle, rummaged in his bag and felt for his grenades.

Nugis lay beside him, huge, warm and perfectly calm. Only the tip of his helmet was visible above the grass. He seemed to be dozing.

Gradually Korzh quieted down. He began to distinguish some familiar sounds among the myriad of blurred, incidental noises. Somewhere from way beyond the hills came the impotent roar of a truck stuck in the mud. Its voice now rose to a frightful pitch, now droned in an indignant

bass. Fainter and fainter sounded the exhausted motor. It seemed to be calling upon the surrounding hills to witness its misery and helplessness. Then suddenly the horn sounded a triumphant note: the driver had pulled the car out of the mud. You could hear the machine rumbling away in relief from the danger spot.

Turning his head in the direction of the sound, Korzh saw that over where the strip of sunset had just disappeared it was light again—not the ruddy glow of burning grass or the smoky fingers of searchlight, but just a small iridescence, as though the earth were reflecting the warmth accumulated throughout the day.

It came from the electric lights that had been switched on in the deep valleys near Georgievka, in the taiga, in the filling stations, in the new town of Klimovsk, in the neighbouring collective farms, and along the railway that ran northward. Those lights cheered the men lying in the wet grass.

A great, warming sense of security engulfed Korzh. It was comforting to know that only fifteen kilometres behind him village girls were sauntering down the dusty road with their arms wound around one another's waists; that at this very moment concrete-mixers were busy somewhere, that job superintendents were hustling about with folding rulers in their pockets, that folk were sleeping in trains, applauding actors in theatres, unharnessing horses, dancing, kissing, driving cars, teaching children fractions.

And to think that he, Korzh, was guarding all that! He felt for his grenades once more. Their solid weight was comforting. He raised himself slightly to move closer to Nugis but the latter suddenly lifted his hand. Rex leaped to his feet. Something curious was happening to the dog. His tail was uplifted, his ears alert and he began to back up, emitting a faint whine.

Nugis pressed his muzzle. The dog shivered.

Over the crest of the hill two figures were seen coming rapidly toward the very bush in which the men lay. As they came closer Korzh saw that there were four of them.... Korzh did not remember what happened after that until the next morning.

He remembered shouting twice. Then his rifle seemed to go off by itself point-blank at the black sheepskin jacket of the nearest bandit. One of the men leaped aside.

"Back!" Nugis shouted to Korzh, but Korzh did not hear. He fired on the run. Without thinking, without waiting for his comrade, he dashed after the border jumper.

At two o'clock that morning Dubakh unfastened his Mauser and took off his rubber boots. There was that pleasant feeling of a day quietly passed. No one had reported traces of border jumpers, asked to have his cartridge pouch replenished, or had to clean a newly-fired gun.

Only two calls had come in from headquarters, and

these were prosaic enough: they were told to turn in their fired cartridge cases and asked whether they had completed the inventory of library books. Then, too, there was the commandant's reminder early that morning that all Party members going to the meeting of delegates were to leave two days ahead of schedule because of the bad roads.

Tiptoeing into the room so as not to waken his daughter, the commander went to the cupboard and took some cold veal. Ilka was asleep on the couch, her thick brows drawn tight in a frown, her little hands clenched hard. Even asleep she had a serious look. She must have been having a nightmare: she twisted and turned, mumbled and even squeaked like a marmot.

Dubakh looked at her and sighed. It was such a pity that his Ilka was growing up a wild little savage.

He had brought Regina, her mother, away from Rostov before she had even finished her schooling. She was a gay Polish girl with green eyes and fluffy coppery hair. He had grumbled at first because the barracks had become so noisy with her coming but then had grown accustomed to it. She was not a particularly clever woman, but she was warm-hearted and gay. She loved her Rostov, the steppes, and poplars. The taiga she feared.

Regina was in her ninth month when Colonel Khutoyarov's band attacked the borderpost. She rushed to help, dragging boxes of cartridges to the trenches. Regina's hotheadedness cost her her life. The boxes were heavy and Ilka was born as the skirmish was drawing to a close.

Gushchin was then acting as orderly. This courageous cavalryman so completely lost his head that he used a dirty kitchen knife to cut the umbilical cord.

Ilka resembled her mother. The same coppery hair, the same wide, boyish mouth and impish eyes. But she was different in character. Her mother could burst out laughing before the tears on her cheeks were quite dry. Ilka smiled rarely and cried even less. She grew up alone, without playmates, without tag, hide-and-seek, dolls or skip rope—all those dear and fascinating games which are so great a part of childhood. She had never been to a city, never seen a boat, a train, an airplane, a piano, or a theatre. On the other hand, she knew exactly how a cartridge pouch should be worn, why midges are smoked out, and what the *konkur-ippik** is.

It is true that the detachment commander had wanted to take all those little savages like Ilka and organize something in the way of a nursery for them but he had gotten no further than making up a list of names. Ultimately Dubakh had had to get an old woman to come and take care of her. But Stepanida, a Ussurian Cossack woman, could not take the place of a mother to Ilka.

The floor squeaked and Ilka sat up and stared at her father sleepily. Then suddenly she asked in surprise:

"But the story?"

* The horse races.

It would have been quite useless to try to argue with her. Every evening, sitting beside her on the couch, Dubakh told Ilka the funniest and most charming fairy tales his tired head could invent. At first he wasn't sure whether he ought to tell Ilka all that delightful nonsense about Alyonushka and Ivan-Tsarevich.* But the detachment commander, Tsorn, a chubby Latvian, settled all his doubts. He brought from Moscow a whole suitcase full of old fairy tales and distributed them among the children. Andersen fell to Ilka's lot. Dubakh himself enjoyed these playful, subtle stories tremendously. He even copied Andersen's saying: "Gilt fades, the pigskin remains." That was well said, he thought, and he meant to slip it in sometimes in his talks on current events.

Two evenings had passed without stories. Dubakh felt guilty, so he sat down beside Ilka and began:

"There was a green oak growing. . . ."

"Oh, but that isn't so!" said Ilka primly. "Not about the oak, tell me about the collie."

"Once upon a time there was a German sheep-dog and Kashchei, the immortal."

The adventures of Ole-Luka-Oya and the immortal Kashchei were unceremoniously woven into his version of Andersen's tales for Ilka. In his stories the tin soldier met Barmalei and Baba-Yaga.** His dogs found a coffer

* Alyonushka and Ivan-Tsarevich—heroes of Russian folk tales.

** Characters in Russian folk tales.

filled with gold, and Ivanushka, the simpleton, shot the grey wolf.

Ilka squatted on the sofa. At her insistence Dubakh turned the lamp low and the room grew quite dark. Only the mirror-like steel of the swords glistened on the wall.

Her father smelled of tobacco, leather belts and Eau de Cologne. His chin was remarkable: if you moved your hand down, it was as smooth as silk, if up—it became as rough as emery paper. Dubakh was strong. He could crush a walnut in his hand, lift a tree trunk, bend a five kopek piece between his fingers. When he was angry he snorted, just as if he were going to sneeze. It was very funny but Ilka knew that she mustn't laugh....

"And that's all," said her father, snapping his cigarette case to. "Alyonushka went to Moscow to her aunt, Kashchei withered away, the flying carpet got spoiled...."

"The moths ate it?"

"But why the moths? Yes, of course.... You're quite right, they ate it up."

Somewhere far off in the taiga a branch snapped. Then a second and a third. Dubakh frowned. Branches snapping on a night with no frost or wind was a bad sign.

"And what happened to the wolf?"

"The wolf? He also disappeared."

Two more branches snapped. Dubakh mechanically began pulling on his boots. He heard a whole cartridge clip fired: near the salt marshes a rifle was being dis-

charged almost without a let-up. Only a raw recruit would fire like that, or else a man who had no time to take aim.

"The dogs killed him?" asked Ilka sleepily. "Probably Rex, don't you think?" And without waiting for an answer, she fell asleep, clasping her father's belt tightly.

Dubakh gently unloosened her fingers and threw open the door.

The rings attached to the fence with rusty wire were creaking. Four watchdogs were whining and straining at their chains in the dark.

An orderly was dashing across the yard to the commander's quarters.

On he ran. He had long ago strayed off the path in the dark. The wretched branches, dead and living, breathing decay and the fragrance of pine needles and fresh green leaves, brushed his face, clutched at his sleeves, plucked at his greatcoat. The brushwood reared up around the roots like fences. The streams rushed under his feet. The brambles wound their wiry tentacles around his feet and the swollen earth sucked at them with a greasy, carnivorous gurgle. Everything was fresh, cold and damp in the April taiga.

He ran on, gasping for breath. His ribs, heart, the very belt and tunic on him, had all suddenly grown too small. The ground went round dizzily under him. The

tree trunks slowly circled over his head, as did their black crowns and the Dipper, which was already nearing the horizon.

Birds winged their way noisily out of the bushes and disappeared in the gloom. Korzh crept up the hill on all fours. His muscles ached and begged for mercy but he continued to crawl. He knew from experience that he would soon get his second wind.

The wind carried the distant whistle of a locomotive from beyond the hill. The bridge rumbled under the express train going East. Korzh crept up to the ridge and then slid down on his back into a gully. Somewhere quite near a dislodged stone rolled down.

"I'll get you!" Korzh shouted, and everything immediately grew still.

Again he ran on in the grip of a powerful desire to catch up with the enemy, to grab him by the shoulders and throw him; to beat him down into the grass and then, his knee on the enemy's throat, catch his breath. He sputtered incoherent curses. So clearly could Korzh visualize the writhing body of the spy stretched out on the grass that as he ran he muttered what he was going to say to the Jap. Korzh had already seen just such a Samurai in some picture or other, brandishing a curious, short, twisted blade at a bearded partisan; it was not at all like a soldier's weapon but some sort of poisoned shaft. This one was also jumping sidewise, and then up. Korzh would hit him with the butt of his rifle. The blow

would resound. And then? "*Sidzukanisinasai*! Quiet! *Doko kara kita-ka*? Where are you from?"

... Korzh grabbed at a tree with both arms. The maple leaves splashed cold drops on his face. He tried to listen.... He stood there wet, deafened by his own heartbeats. The helmet burned his head. His temples throbbed.

He looked around. It was light. There was a green line on the ashy grey grass left by the skirts of his great-coat. A little pool, embowered by sword-lilies, gleamed. The feathery down of poplars was floating on the smooth surface of the pool; little grey birds were chasing each other, rippling it. A sunbeam quivered on its bed, carpeted with moulten leaves. His coat, the single track in the cold grass, the awakening morning sky, the empty cartridge pouch and the powder stains on the lock of his rifle all reminded Korzh that his chase was over. He sank to his knees, and, thrusting his face into the pool, gulped water until his teeth ached with the cold. Then he got up, smoothed his damp coat and went west, to where the green belfry of the Georgievka church projected.

Three Red Army men, with a dog and a Degtyaryov machine gun, sent by the commander to the place of the shooting, found Nugis at dawn. He was sitting in the bushes, bespattered with mud, grey with anger, whispering curses in Latvian. This was a sure sign of failure.

"Who was shooting?" asked the leader of the detail.

"A rifle, probably," said Nugis curtly.

"A border jumper?"

"No, a border fool!"

"Where's Korzh?"

"Don't know," said Nugis glumly. "I called him. I have no desire to play nursemaid to a fool."

He got up and pushed the bushes apart. Rex whined and fell back.

In the middle of a glade, his purple maw open, lay a dead bear. There was a smell of scorched fur. Korzh had fired point-blank.

Once out in the fields, Korzh realized that he had made a mistake. What lay ahead was not Georgievka. Instead of the familiar brick belfry there was a watch-tower roofed with corrugated zinc.

The taiga had come to an end. The land sloped south in broad, black waves, bearing tractors, gasoline drums, willows and green waggons. Men were ploughing, and the ploughshares sparkled in the sun. Layers of blue smoke from the kerosene-fed engines hung over the earth.

The engine of a car spluttered behind Korzh. The driver, a smiling girl whose face was peeling from the sun, threw upon the door of the pick-up truck.

"Your feet—wipe your feet," she said in housewifely fashion.

"But where to?" asked Korzh.

"What do you mean where to? Time for lunch. Don't you smell it?"

The odour of freshly-baked white bread and hot borshch came from the machine.

"Nothing doing," said Korzh, his voice trembling.

"But just taste the soup. Stop! Where are you going to?"

"To Georgievka."

"I beg your pardon," said the girl. The car drove on, spluttering at the insult.

Korzh followed her with his eyes for a long time. Capable girl. Cossack. She certainly wouldn't bungle her job of bringing borshch to the green waggons. Food.... But what was happening at the borderpost? Nugis had already returned. Brooding, no doubt, and feeding Rex. Korzh would have to walk across the yard with his head down, his cartridge pouch empty. He could already picture Dubakh gazing at him sternly, his elbows on the table. He had visualized the humiliating scene in all possible variations even before he arrived at Georgievka.

It was noon. His coat was dry. His body made a short blue shadow on the road.

Three kilometres from the village, near the mill, he came across a Korean youth in a striped jersey. He was sitting on a millstone, whittling a stick. Near him, whining and scratching, lay a shaggy dog.

"Good day, Comrade Commander," said the Korean distinctly.

"I am not a commander."

"Excuse me. I made a mistake."

For a time neither said a word. Korzh looked at the Korean's arms with a feeling of pleasure. Sinewy, naked to the elbow, they shone like gold in the sun. The lad was peeling the green bark off the stick.

"I have far to go. It's dull walking doing nothing. I'm making a fife," explained the Korean.

The dog whined. He fixed pleading eyes, bloodshot from the heat, on his master.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Korzh.

"Nothing—just fleas."

He rose, put the fife to his lips, and drew forth a deep, sad note. The player screwed up his eyes; his Adam's apple danced up and down in his thin neck. He played on, inclining his close-cropped head—a curious fellow. Like all Koreans, he looked a little like a Japanese. Korzh remembered the garden in the hospital and the sallow Red Army man in the wheel chair. After his crazy night he was ready to suspect every passer-by of being a spy.

"Enough?" asked the musician, finishing his song.

"Enough."

The Korean had some corn on the cob and some mashed beans with him.

"Will you try some?" he offered cordially.

Korzh refused. He even turned away to avoid seeing



the yellow grains melt in the lad's mouth. But that wasn't much of a help. He saw a woodpecker getting worms from the bark of a tree. A bright, plump squirrel shot by. Korzh looked down: underfoot a fat caterpillar was gnawing at a leaf. Even the streams murmured in a disgusting, contented gurgle. Everything around him was eating, gorging, pecking, drinking, sucking. It made him sick to his stomach.

"Who are you?" he asked rather gruffly.

The Korean screwed up his eyes.

"Why? This isn't the forbidden zone. Well, let's say a mechanic."

"We're all mechanics," said Korzh darkly. "What's in the sack?"

The mechanic silently took out a tractor piston wrapped in oakum. The piston was an old one with the trademark of John Deere, very rare in those districts.

"I got it by pull," boasted the lad. "You know how these parts are simply grabbed up."

They spoke a little longer and then separated. The Korean again started playing.

The dreary, guttural sounds of the fife followed Korzh a long way. But when the last quavering note broke off, he stopped, again filled with suspicion. That was just how the reapers went, with bundles.... A musician, fleas. And what had a piston with the John Deere trademark to do with it? Fooled him, like a quail, with his fife!

Stumbling over roots, he rushed back to the mill. The

musician was in no hurry. He walked along, trailing a willow twig along the path. The green fife stuck out from under his arm.

He looked curiously at the panting Red Army man.

"Stop!" Korzh shouted. "Stop! I have a question. You say you're a mechanic.... Where did you get this piston?"

"I don't understand—that is, from the storeroom."

"What I want to know is whether it's from Stalingrad or from Kharkov."

"You want to certify it?"

"No, simply for my own information."

"Don't know.... I think it's from Kharkov."

Korzh sighed with relief. His small, firm nostrils dilated and then contracted. Joy radiated from his wind-blown cheeks. He straightened up as if he had found firm support.

"And since when does the Kharkov Tractor Plant produce John Deere pistons?" he asked almost gaily.

"*Tsubo*!" the Korean shouted and struck the dog.

The hound ran off to a respectful distance and howled dismally.

"May I go?"

"Of course—but to the borderpost."

And so they went. Through the aspen grove where the thrushes warbled, along the green, damp ridge of the Seven Brothers and past Krotova Hollow, with its dank smell and dirty ice. First went the tired, flea-bitten dog,

then the Korean in the striped jersey, and last of all the preoccupied Korzh with his coat fastened carefully on all four hooks.

Chapter Seven

Sato had never seen a town as strange as Tsing-kiang. All of it, from the fortress walls down to the dog kennels, was built of clay. A machine-gun burst would pierce any of the towers. And the people who had built this ridiculous fortress still had confidence in its strength: every spring they carefully filled in the cracks and bullet holes and restored the corners that had crumbled.

Incidentally, in his five months in Tsing-kiang, Sato had not yet managed to see it properly. A soldier's day is like a kitbag which contains everything except free space.

Ever since the colonists had been given plots near Tsing-kiang the detachment had not had a single quiet day.

Manchurian truck gardeners had lived on the outskirts of the settlement. No little time was lost in forcing them to make way for the newcomers. Half of them, in spite of the edict forbidding any mass movement through the province, left for the mountains, to join the partisans.

The first green shoots were pushing up on the colonists' lands around Tsing-kiang before the soldiers returned to their usual routine.

As the lieutenant who examined the soldiers' diaries every Thursday remarked, Sato's notes had grown meatier. He had already mastered two chapters of the pamphlet, "The Spirit of the Emperor's Army" and could make quite a coherent report on Araki's article, "The Tasks of Japan in the Epoch of Siowa." When the soldiers began to sing the lieutenant's favourite song, "The Sabres Sparkle as Lightning," the voice of the diligent Sato could be clearly distinguished above the others.

Sato resolutely refused to make friends with the chatterbox Miyako and the cynical Tarada. It disgusted him to listen to these scandalmongers ranting about the venality of the foreign office or their underhand mimickry of the sergeant major. He was friendly only with Kondo, the silent stevedore from Matsmai. First of all, Kondo came from his own province; and then, he was considered the strongest man in the whole company.

Nursing his secret dreams of getting three stars, Sato conscientiously imitated the privates first class and the company clerk Mito.

The foppish Kawamoto, the tobacco man, who had a marvellous way of winding his puttees, the brawny Taki, who bowed so punctiliously and made such perfect reports, and the clerk, who had three strong points: a judicious tone of voice, contempt for the Russians and a love for long quotations, all served as his models.

Once, mustering up all his courage, he asked Mito

for permission to copy some statements made by army heroes which the clerk had recorded in his copy-book. The clerk was a bit taken aback. He was not inclined to share his superior thoughts with privates second class.

"A frog cannot view the whole world from a well," he remarked dryly.

But Sato's voice was so respectful and his bow so low, that the clerk relented. Moreover, this diligent, clumsy soldier had an excellent hand.

"Very well," said Mito, "but first you copy a report on the stores."

* * *

Life in the garrison was in no way remarkable for the variety it offered. That summer Sato noted down in his diary only two special days: the lieutenant's birthday and a visit to the red light district.

That visit was a real event for the garrison. First of all, the men marched through the whole town without the commands of the sergeant major, letting their eyes wander at will; and secondly, every soldier wants to forget the barracks for at least an hour.

O-Kiku, the girl who fell to Sato's lot, was really very nice. She had come from Tsuruga together with a group of colonists.

She had a lovely, satiny skin, arched eyebrows and hair caught in a golden net, after the Chinese fashion.

"It's nice when your own people come," she said, helping Sato unlace his shoes. "There's nothing to talk about with the shopkeepers. . . ."

"We'll put an end to all that," Sato promised resolutely.

They spent a rather pleasant hour, fooling around on the bed and talking all sorts of nonsense.

O-Kiku, it appeared, had come from almost the same region as Sato, and was the daughter of a Hokkaido lumberjack. She had been sold only the year before in Tsuruga for 150 yen. O-Kiku repeated this sum several times. Evidently the high price gratified her womanly pride.

Then she showed him a malachite stone, her amulet against foul diseases, and a portrait of the Russian God, thin and bearded like an Ainu, and with a copper halo around his head. The girl was a Christian.

Her bubbling laughter, mocking eyes and full neck so thoroughly turned Sato's head that he bought her watermelon seeds, almonds and four glasses of warmed beer without even arguing.

Slightly tipsy, he began to rail without any apparent reason against Corporal Akita's bullying and his habit of extorting cigarettes from the soldiers. O-Kiku listened to him, shaking her heavy crown of hair, evidently mindless of all the half-drunk soldier was telling her.

"Poor boy!" she said mechanically.

"He'll never make his three stripes," mumbled Sato.

"Poor boy," she repeated, and yawned.

Behind the curtain someone coughed loudly. Sato caught himself in time. He glanced at O-Kiku fearfully. The girl was calmly drawing at her cigarette, indifferent to everything in the world. Her indifference reassured Sato, but not wanting to take any chances, he remarked:

"However, that is but a trifle. Everyone in the company is aware of Mr. Akita's bravery."

Sato had no time to right his blunder fully: along the corridor, unceremoniously pulling aside the curtains, strode Sergeant Major Ogawa.

The girl evidently liked Sato too.

"Come again," she said.

"When I become a sergeant major. . . ."

The contented laughter of soldiers and their wisecracks could be heard from all the cubicles.

The men fell in line and were marched to the barracks. And then they had enough to boast of for a whole month.

Sato often thought of O-Kiku: her laughter, her full neck and her mocking eyes. But soon more interesting events crowded out the thoughts of the pretty girl.

An enterprising colonist opened a movie house in the town. The low-ceilinged clay barn, decorated with flags, stood right across from the soldiers' drill grounds.

In the evenings a middle-aged *katsuben** stood at the

* Man who makes the running comments on the film.

entrance to the cinema. Over his head hung a big pasteboard poster showing a Japanese cavalryman. To entice the passers-by, he shouted:

"The exploits of Lieutenant Gayasi! A Japanese officer in the camp of the Red Cossacks! Secrets of the Russian harems!"

The lieutenant was annoyed by its proximity. The shouts interfered with the whistles and commands, distracting the soldiers. Undoubtedly the theatre would have been transferred to another part of the town if not for the patriotism displayed just at the right moment by the proprietor of the barn. All the officers received free tickets to the cinema. There was also to be an extra showing for the petty officers once a week.

Sato got a ticket to the second installment of the popular film "The Cunning of Lieutenant Gayasi."

He saw everything the posters had promised: a battle between Japanese cavalrymen and the infantry, the flight of the Cossacks and a fire on a mysterious ship commanded by Admiral Ivan Smirnov. True, the plot remained vague after the cuts made by the censor's scissors, but Sato was delighted and continually nudged the phlegmatic Kondo with his elbow. The sight of a burning airplane and the bayonet charge of the paratroopers alone were worth it all....

The brave Lieutenant Gayasi was rescuing Hanaye, a Manchurian minister's daughter who had been kidnapped

by a detachment of Cossacks while taking a walk. Six kidnappers, as fat as monks, set on Gayasi with their spears. The Russians were brutal and clumsy, the lieutenant elusive as a beam of light. His sword blinded his foes.

Through the darkness came the modulated voice of the *katsuben,* relating the plot.

"He moved like lightning!" said the speaker. "The Russians were like oaks. Mr. Gayasi knew that Hanaye was waiting for him behind the closed doors."

And then Hanaye, large tears on her powdered cheeks, was flashed on the screen. She was strumming a samisen. Near her, with a bottle in his hand, the Russian colonel was dancing.

Then the screen was packed with a crowd of dazed, bearded men holding their rifles like sticks. There were so many of them that Sato trembled for the fate of Gayasi's company. He looked fearfully at the sturdy legs and the open mouths of the attacking men.

However, his anxiety soon ended. Airplanes appeared, and in a minute the corpses were strewn thicker than salted fish in vats.

"The lieutenant was wounded in the hand," continued the *katsuben,* as Gayasi, his hand bandaged, was flashed on. "But the lovely Hanaye quickly cured the wound with her herbs and her love. He returned to active service as a major."

Discussing the exploits of Lieutenant Gayasi, the soldiers reluctantly left the cinema.

"They say that many privates return to the islands as sergeant majors," remarked Kondo.

"In the fall new appointments are expected," answered Sato in the same vein.

"So...."

"That's still to be seen...."

And both soldiers exploded with laughter—so identical were the thoughts roused by the picture.

* * *

Autumn was approaching. After a leaflets incident in the sixth regiment and numerous arrests in other units the war office made talks with the soldiers on current events compulsory.

In the Tsing-kiang garrison these talks were given by the lieutenant himself. Shortly after the detachment arrived at the barracks, notes on the lectures appeared in all the soldiers' diaries: "How War Enriches the Peasant," "All Communists Are Liars and Spies," "The Riches of Manchukuo Were Conquered for the People."

Sato thought the third talk particularly interesting. He would never have believed before the lieutenant's talk how rich this dust-laden, dreary land was.

Slowly, as though dictating, Amakasu described the local mountains, where the indifferent, lazy Manchurians were trampling underfoot gold, copper and silver. He told them about the virgin forests of the north, so unacquaint-

ed with man that the birds there just flew into your hand; of the oil stains found by a merchant near Gunzyan; of the southern districts, overburdened by a surplus of wheat, millet and beans.

The lieutenant also enumerated iron, asbestos, sulphur, coal, barium, cement, talc, magnesium and phosphorites, but Sato remembered only one word in the list—gold. He had sensed its incomprehensible power as a child. The fairy tales read to them by Mr. Yamadzaki, their schoolteacher, spoke of gold, and so did the films and adventure stories. It was spoken of respectfully by his father and by the old fish vendor Nagano, by the policeman and by the basketweaver who brought his penny goods from the south. The fishermen who had been to Karafuto mysteriously displayed dull grains of metal carefully wrapped up in paper. It could buy everything: fishing rights, a seine, a house, a *kavasaki** and even the favour of the village scribe.

Evenings, sitting in the latrine, the soldiers would discuss the lieutenant's lecture.

"F-fine that we didn't let the R-r-russians get into Manchukuo," said Miyako.

"Rot! They have more gold than we have here. Land is the most important thing."

"We'll see what the autumn brings."

"Gold is more profitable than barley," remarked

* A fishing motor boat.

Tarada. "I would drive all the prisoners condemned to hard labour from all the islands to dig it."

"And who will sow?"

"Let the Manchurians dig the earth."

"Colonization is impossible without women. . . ."

"Let there be gold, and the tarts will come," concluded Tarada amidst a general burst of laughter.

After the lieutenant's lecture Sato, who had always excelled at drill, began to walk around with his eyes to the ground. The thought of all the gold underfoot did not leave the soldier. He began to look closely at the sparkling bits of quartz, pyrites, and glass to be found on the square. When the company went outside the town Sato would stealthily slip into his pockets bits of iron ore and other likely stones.

Once during tactical exercises he contrived to gather and secretly bring to the barracks in his kerchief quite a lot of yellow, and, what seemed to him, particularly gold-bearing, earth.

He confided his plans to Kondo and before long they had hidden no less than a pailful of that precious earth near the latrine. For want of a basin to wash the gold, they had to initiate the cook into their secret.

They chose wash-day for their purposes, when part of the company was sent off with bundles of soiled linen some two miles out of the city.

It was all planned beforehand. Sato chose a quiet spot, and, after putting the clothes to soak, hastily fixed up

a trough of pine bark. At twelve sharp the cook brought the lunch. He served the barley, gave Sato a piece of cloth and a basin, and returned to his cart.

Kondo was on duty and could not take part in the sifting. But this even suited Sato more: the glittering bits of sand on the ground were too few to be shared by three.

He lay the piece of cloth on the bottom of the trough, sprinkled in some earth and began to pour water over it from the basin.

Soon it seemed to him that some grains of gold were gleaming dully in the heap of dark sand. He was so carried away by his work that he never noticed the stream had swept off his linen toward the boulder on which the sergeant major was perched.

Catching up a *fundosi*,* Ogawa hid behind a tree and watched the soldier's manipulations.

Finally a stinging blow from the wet rag tore Sato away from his work. The half-naked soldier jumped up, mumbling excuses.

"Hand it over!" Ogawa demanded, coolly.

Sato stretched out a handful of the dark sand to the sergeant major.

"You are enterprising but stupid," Ogawa said contemptuously.

He struck at the palm and the priceless sand flew into the bushes.

* Loin cloth.

"Get dressed and go to the carts."

Sato washed the basin and left, looking back regretfully at the bushes. The cook, to whom he showed his empty hands, did not believe him.

"Fork it up," he said, stretching out his hand.

Sato related how the sergeant major had caught him.

"Idiot!" said the exasperated cook. "The sergeant major wanted to play around with the sand himself."

For a long time that night Sato couldn't fall asleep. All sorts of punishments, one more terrible than the other, jogged through his mind. Either he saw himself being pushed into a cold, damp cell by the gloating Tarada, or a kitbag filled with stones, or the expressionless face of the clerk Mito, pasting up on the bulletin board the order to have him shot.

When the sound of the bugle blared over Sato's head he jumped up and was dressed before all the others.

That day, for the first time since enlistment, he received a public reprimand.

* * *

Contrary to expectations, it was a wet autumn. The clouds crawled slowly over the hills. The air, the soil, the dying leaves and the black maple bark were all heavy with moisture. All the spare shoes grew mouldy, the linen damp.

The mud on the roads lay ankle deep; the soldiers' faces, cartridge belts, the barrels of the mountain guns,

the horses' tails and the carts were all plastered with a light, greasy coat of clay.

It was particularly difficult to climb the hills. The slopes were strewn with tiny, sharp pebbles and just oozed with water. Not infrequently a soldier would lose balance, fling his arms around and slide down. Even the trees had but a slight hold on such hills. A bit of a squall was enough to uproot them, and they fell bearing others off along. Roots plastered with damp earth were to be seen everywhere.

To train the soldiers for night combat the lieutenant ordered dark-lensed goggles distributed. The wearer couldn't even make out his neighbour at noon.

The peasants who came to town from the neighbouring settlements watched the soldiers with wonder and fear as they crept stealthily through the tall grass. When the corporal whistled they jumped up, ran, stretched out their arms, stumbled, fell and ran on again; they were diligent and clumsy, like new-born pups.

The number of accidents at drill increased. Private Umera stumbled into a pit and broke his leg. Corporal Akita smashed his goggles against a tree. Kondo ripped open orderly Tayama's shoulder with his bayonet. However, the lieutenant continued the training. The nights were growing darker and longer and the partisan detachments bolder and more persistent.

Autumn did not bring the peace the newspapers had dreamed of.

The harvest was abundant but not many were able to gather it all in. The Manchurian villages, where before one could always hire a couple of dozen farmhands, proved quite deserted. Deprived of their land, the men left for the mountains to sow poppies on hidden plots, and to waylay truck-borne troops. The cold huts contained only women, old men and children. What they were hoping for and what they ate was a mystery, for the pots were empty and only ashes lay on the hearths.

The old faces of the children, their swollen bellies and their skinny shoulder blades made even the soldiers look aside. But the women did not cry. They looked at the newcomers through eyes glazed with hate. All the knives, axes and even sickles were taken away from them. Their fingers were too feeble to choke the soldiers at night, but their glances expressed the desire.

Once Sato heard the sergeant major say as he left a hut:

"It would be better if these hags cursed!"

Fires broke out more and more frequently. Straw huts, warehouses and crops in the field went up in flames. Sometimes the soldiers themselves set fire to the tall millet so as to drive out the rebels. Sentries made the rounds of the fields day and night.

At the request of the colonists the command maintained posts in the settlements all autumn, but the feeling of imminent trouble did not vanish. No colonist dared risk going from one settlement to another at night. They lived

without songs, without holiday excursions to the fields. Even near Tsing-kiang a step could not be taken without stumbling against barbed wire.

* * *

"W-when will they s-stop playing h-hide-and-seek?" asked Miyako, walking behind Sato.

The naive Kondo sighed.

"Never, I'm afraid."

"Fiddlesticks," said Sato, who had acquired the sergeant major's resoluteness of tone. "Hunger will drive them back to the villages."

With a superior air, he sized up his friends, exhausted and bespattered with mud. In spite of the forty-kilometre march Sato felt in fine fettle. Everything delighted him: the October chill, the sharp notes of the bugles, his friends' jokes, the nights spent in the deserted Manchurian huts where one might stealthily rummage about among the rags. This was ever so much more exciting than crawling on your belly in the mud or groping about in dark goggles.

Not all the marches were successful. Some coffins sewn up in tarred canvas had been sent off to the islands, but he felt no qualms about his own safety. In August he had acquired from Miyako the very best invocation in existence in exchange for a pack of cigarettes and six rations of sake. It was equally potent against machine guns and grenades. All he had to do was repeat over and over again

as he ran: "I want to be killed ... want to be killed." Everybody knows that death always does just exactly the opposite of what a man asks.

Some fifty riflemen were going to the settlement of Nanfu, where, as had been reported by their agents, a detachment of partisans had spent the last few nights.

On either side of the road rose the high brown walls of millet. Their stalks moaned monotonously to the tune of the wind.

For fear of bandits hiding there, the lieutenant ordered the men to set fire to the millet. Flames blazed up in three places at once, merged, and then one light yellow strip flew forward, felling the russet growth. There was practically no smoke. Two machine-gunners took up positions on top of the hill, but only pheasants, flapping their short wings, ran out on the road to escape the fire.

As might have been expected, the partisans had already left Nanfu. All the six wells in the village were poisoned with arsenic, and the soldiers were left without drinking water. They had to unseal their reserve water barrel brought from Tsing-kiang.

The village was dead; the only inhabitants of the deserted huts were rats and lean dogs. Nothing but heaps of damp rags everywhere.

The men were tired, and the lieutenant decided to spend the whole day in Nanfu. Half a hundred healthy, clean young men quickly transformed the village. They

dug up some paper and rice glue for the windows and gathered underbrush for the stoves.

After the clean up Amakasu ordered them to search all the huts and dugouts in and around Nanfu.

Only Miyako and Sato had any luck. In a remote dugout in a truck garden they found a peasant. He was a middle-aged man in rough linen trousers and a straw hat. He knew enough not to run at sight of the soldiers. On the floor of his dugout they found two empty cartridges from an Arisaka rifle. He said his children had found them.

Sato was present when he was questioned. At Amakasu's order he forced the peasant to his knees and then, fixing his bayonet, stepped back to the door.

The prisoner kneeled, his dark, gloomy face lowered. He muttered some nonsense that the lieutenant didn't even bother to take down.

He had the impudence to regard himself as half-Japanese and insist that he was born on the Island of Formosa, his mother being a Korean woman, Kiru, and his father Dzihei, a grocery clerk. The lieutenant could barely restrain his laughter as he watched this cunning but clumsy, long-legged peasant cowering before him. Who would believe that this peasant had grown up on the islands of Yamato! True, he spoke the South Japanese dialect without any accent, but the lieutenant was wise to such tricks.

Not to drag things out, the lieutenant cut him short.

"That's enough! When did you leave Vladivostok?"

This simple question so embarrassed the peasant that he began to stutter. In a voice breaking with excitement he began to explain that he had come from Tsuruga fifteen years before through Seul and had never seen Vladivostok.

He continued to mumble all sorts of nonsense while the lieutenant, bored by it all, examined the prisoner's worn, dirty *uli.** His veined legs gave Amakasu an idea.

"Take off your shoes," he said almost good-naturedly.

Without understanding what the lieutenant was after, the prisoner submissively took off the *uli.* His legs were smooth and crooked, but this, of course, was no sign that the prisoner had been born on Formosa. Everyone knows that mothers on the continent also strap their children to their backs.

"Show me your toes!"

Without waiting for an answer the lieutenant stooped, grasped the prisoner by his ankle and pulled the leg up. Thrown down on his back, the peasant fearfully watched the lieutenant's thick eyebrows rise higher and higher.

Removing his glove, Amakasu felt the skin between the first two toes. The lieutenant knew that every son of Yamato who has worn sandals retains for the rest of his life the hard, smooth calluses left by the strap between the toes.

There were no calluses on the peasant's toes.

* Chinese boots.

"Well?" mocked the lieutenant.

Lying on his back with his legs up, the prisoner muttered something about having spent fifteen years in Manchuria.

The lieutenant beckoned to Sato.

"You have a good hand," he said, turning away from the prisoner. "Dig up a piece of cardboard and write the following." After a pause he slowly dictated: " 'This man is a spy, a communist and a charlatan. . . .' "

"Colonel, I swear by my father and my children. . . ." said the peasant in a dead voice.

" '. . . Burial prohibited.' Is that clear?"

"Quite clear!" said Sato smartly. He looked with curiosity at the "spy": the peasant's entire face was covered with big drops of sweat.

Kondo was mending his gloves when Sato entered the hut and placed a big piece of yellow cardboard on the floor.

"Who is he?" asked Kondo, nodding toward the window.

Sato went into raptures at the lieutenant's ingenuity when he told the story to his friend. But to his surprise the story did not make the proper impression on the naive Kondo.

"That means whoever didn't wear sandals is a spy?" he asked, biting off the thread.

"But he really was lying. . . ."

"And who doesn't lie around here?"

"Well, that's going too far," said Sato, annoyed by his friend's indifference. "I repeat: his toes were absolutely smooth."

"Did you feel them?"

"Idiot," cried Sato, energetically stirring the India ink with his brush. You could see that from the lieutenant's face."

"Oh-h really? Wonder why you didn't choose fortune telling for your profession!"

Without answering Sato began to print the sign for "man." Anxious to show off his handwriting, he tried his very hardest. It came out well. The teacher of caligraphy who had rapped Sato so many times over the knuckles with his short ruler would have been satisfied with these expressive, energetic signs. He made lines resembling a charred bamboo stick and a comet's tail, elegantly rounded and short, hard lines with the ends cut short as if the writer had not had the patience to work smoothly.

Kondo looked admiringly at Sato's work.

"That's good enough to hang up on the wall," he approved.

The next was quite a difficult sign: "Spy," which, as you know, consists of twenty-nine lines. While Sato was slowly tracing a curved line, a shot rang out behind the window. The brush trembled and a blot fell on the cardboard, spoiling the lovely sign.

"He pushed your hand," remarked Kondo maliciously.

"Who?"

"The peasant. That means you were wrong."

Sato looked fearfully at the blot, which was slowly spreading over the cardboard. Strange that the shot should have been fired just when he was drawing the sign "spy."

Sato was reprimanded for his carelessness by the lieutenant. And when the soldier attached the shameful inscription to the corpse lying on his side in the coarse grass, it seemed to him that the peasant smiled mockingly at him.

Sato kicked the "spy" in the face to punish him for his impudence.

Chapter Eight

It was exactly a year since Korzh, tired but exultant, had led the Korean to the borderpost.

Things more important than the crazy chase after the bear had happened during this time.

In the summer, near a well, Korzh had detained a beggar woman with pestilence-laden ampules baked into a loaf of bread.

Ilka, chasing a squirrel, had found in the hollow of a tree a bundle of leaflets printed in Harbin.

With Rex's help they had located an underground radio station at work.

A gang headed by Azarov, a Whiteguard captain, had been tracked down and wiped out.

But Belik had only to poke out of his kitchen at din-

nertime and flourish the stub tail of the bear for everyone at the table to go off into peals of laughter.

The caricature in the detachment newspaper depicting Korzh and the bear running down a race track and reaching the tape together was still fresh in everyone's memory.

Korzh himself laughed heartily whenever he recalled that night replete with sounds, the boots that squeaked and the green fife of the tractor mechanic. Could it have ever occured to him then to examine that shaggy, rust-coloured dog running alongside the Korean?

Old Rex, who had unravelled hundreds of mysteries in his day, proved more penetrating than the raw recruit. Before the commander was able to put any questions to the Korean, Rex flew at the dog and began worrying him with his teeth. He tore open an outer skin and shook out of it a fox-terrier, squealing with fright like a pig in a sack.

Attached to the skin they found the blueprints of two forts and a sheet of clean blue paper so important that the squad commander who took it to headquarters was accompanied by three riflemen.

This was all so unexpected that even Nugis, who had been angered by the ridiculous attack on the bear, softened. He came up to the rookie and asked:

"How did it happen? Accidentally?"

"Can't say."

"You suspected him?"

"I guessed."

"What'd you have to go by?"

"His eyes," smiled Korzh. "Thieves never look you straight in the face."

* * *

There had been changes at the borderpost since the day Belik hung the skin of the black bear over Ilka's cot.

Gaichuk and Uvarov, after finishing their term of service, went into the reserve. A library was brought from headquarters, as well as four Degtyaryov machine guns. Along the border, from the salt marshes to the milepost at the crossroads, they had cut down the trees over a ten-metre swath. One evening in March Nedzvetsky's band lay in wait here to kidnap Dubakh and carry him across the border. The attempt cost two of the White Cossacks their lives, but the commander himself barely made his way out of the taiga alive. He had to treat his bullet-shattered collarbone all summer: the bones grew together slowly, in a knot, and Dubakh became even more stooped.

The year had changed Korzh but little. His mischievous face wore the same gay expression and his freckled hands remained just as restless. His place in the ranks was always at the left flank. He was so short he looked more like a mascot than a machine-gunner. Only his concentrated glance, his precise speech and his scratched, sunburnt hands bespoke the difficult schooling he had gone through.

It had been a restless, sultry summer. The radio had broadcast with increasing frequency accounts of firing at Tury Rog and of border markers dug up by the Japanese.

In August the rains came. For nine days a mass of low clouds moved continuously through the treetops. The parched, cracked earth, the leaves, the drooping grass, the rodents' burrows, the gullies, the streams, the wells—everything greedily drank in the large warm drops.

The sun, burnished a coppery gold by the moisture-laden air, showed but rarely. The birds and bees fell silent. In the fields hundreds of trucks stood motionless, sunk to their axles in mud, and the drivers got their fill of sleep as they waited for the tractors to rescue them.

The travelling cinema remained stuck at the post to the great joy of the men. Every day now the windows in the sleeping quarters were curtained, and films about the Baltic, Chapayev and airplanes were shown.

That was the only event of moment in the routine life of the borderpost. Rain, snowstorms, heat and cold affected only the thermometre and the barometre. As Dubakh once expressed it, Nature had only a consultative vote at the frontier.

As usual the chalk scratched its way across the blackboard in the morning as the commander patiently explained to the rookies just what ballistics meant, how many times a horse breathes a minute, and why water cooling is more effective than air cooling.

The Degtyaryov machine guns rattled away on the firing grounds under pouring rains.

Steam rose in clouds in the drying room, where boots and clothes were hung in rows. Not infrequently the men had to leave the film showing before it was over and go out into the rain and the autumn night, with the odour of warm dampness clinging to their waterproofs.

The clouds continued to roll by. The monotonous patter of the downpour and the contented murmur of rivulets was to be heard everywhere. Whole lakes of water turned into drops and fell on the hills, to disappear no one knows where.

At last the earth had drunk its fill. Then, instantaneously, the streams darkened and swelled. Where just the day before men had stepped from stone to stone without wetting their feet, the water now surged, sweeping horses off their feet.

The Pachiheza frothed with yellow clots of foam; it was full of whirlpools. Logs, wattle fences and trees uprooted by the storm did somersaults in its coffee-coloured waters. More and more frequently the men came across scattered sheafs of hay blown from some obliterated stacks, grass roofs and whole frameworks of huts. The animals deserted the islets, only to drown.

During the night a man crossed over from the other shore on a log. He was tall, naked, and, judging by his unhurried movements, a man to be reckoned with. On reaching the shore he rubbed the calves of his legs, which

were blue from the cold water, removed some cotton from his ears and began exercising to warm up.

The rain drummed down on his naked back. The swimmer shivered and cursed the cold Pachiheza.

He continued at his gymnastics such a long time that Rex, lying behind a stone, lost all patience. He sighed and pushed his damp nose into Nugis' side.

"Fu . . u . ." motioned Nugis with his lips.

Rex yawned nervously. The blurred whiteness of the naked body and the stranger's abrupt movements irritated him. He was waiting for the brief command "At him" to jump on the man's back and throw him.

But his master kept silent. He had been lying there since the evening before under a canvas hood, immobile, like one of the polished Pachiheza stones. Alongside Nugis, in the bushes, squatted Korzh, and a little farther off Red Army man Zimin was setting up a Degtyaryov machine gun.

The men's capes, tunics and underwear were all soaking wet. Water dripped down their necks. From time to time the wind deftly flung whole handfuls of cold water under their cap brims. The men did not even try to dry their faces. For six hours they had been watching the Pachiheza without stirring.

They were expecting a small Whiteguard band.

The orders were to take them alive.

The naked man moved toward the stones and sat down near Korzh. He was a middle-aged man with a bull neck

and sloping shoulders. Bits of cord were tied around his wrists and ankles—an experienced soldier's precaution against cramps in the cold river. Korzh could hear his breathing, quickened by the struggle with the Pachiheza; he saw his wet back and his slanting thighs. The odour of stale alcohol was distinct in the rain-washed air. The border jumper was so close that Korzh could have touched his shoulder by stretching out a hand.

After resting, the naked man made a trumpet of his hands and imitated the tinny call of the rooster pheasant.

The opposite shore remained silent. The darkness released only the pitter-patter of the rain and the angry grumble of the river.

The swimmer called again, this time louder.

Rex crawled up closer and again nudged his master with his nose. The dog pricked up his ears. He was preparing to jump. His skin wrinkled on his back, his fangs glittered.

Without turning, Nugis laid a heavy hand on the dog's head. Rex quieted down and stretched out his paws; only his eyes grew still greener and deeper; his tail quivered in the wet grass.

Holding their breath, the three men waited for the reply. At last the barely audible sound of a tin fife came from the tall grasses on the opposite shore. The rooster pheasant had received an answer from his mate.

The cry was repeated in the middle of the river, and

soon a raft could be seen amidst the yellow foam and branches.

The naked man straightened up and laughed almost voicelessly. Tremendous relief, impatience and triumph were expressed in his soft laughter. He took a deep breath to send another call, but a rough palm closed his mouth.

"I'll shoot!" whispered Korzh.

"Quiet!" cautioned Nugis.

Instead of answering, the naked man bit Korzh's palm. He put up a stiff fight, grunting, striking out with his knees and elbows, attempting to hit his opponent below the belt. He managed to cry out several times before they gagged him and snapped the handcuffs to.

"I'll put this down against you too," whispered Korzh, tying a handkerchief around his hand.

He moved closer to the water's edge and imitated a pheasant. From the middle of the river immediately came the quiet answer of a bird.

Lurching, the raft slowly crossed the Pachiheza. The rowlocks of willow twigs creaked. The oarsman was rowing sailor fashion, in spurts, deftly shaking off the water from his oars.

The raft moved along almost parallel with the bank, thrust away by the eddies and the strong undertow. The Red Army men jumped from rock to rock in pursuit. Rex remained near the border jumper, breathing hotly in his face.

The border guards and the raft were converging on

a point somewhere far ahead on the deserted and wet bank of the Pachiheza.

The wet capes rustled and clung to the men's legs. Korzh discarded his on the run. Grasping wet branches, he clambered up a mound which rose right from the river bank, slid down the slippery grass and found himself at a creek separated from the river by a stony spit.

Nugis arrived a minute later and lay down in the water just behind the spit. In spite of his height he was remarkable at making himself invisible everywhere.

The raft was already pulling up to the very bank when the oarsman suddenly stopped and whispered:

"Kostya, is that you?"

Korzh did not answer. Standing in the bushes, he unfastened his holster and took out his revolver.

There was a whispered consultation on the raft.

A lump of earth loosened by the river slapped noisily into the water. Zimin was clambering down the hill, dislodging the stones on his way.

"Tfu, the devil!" muttered the oarsman. He thought for a second and then began to row away from the bank.

"Stop!" cried Korzh.

The five men on the raft jumped up all together and pushed off with their poles. There was a string of loud curses.

"Back!"

"Here, catch hold of the rope," replied the oarsman.

He rose and flung his arm out. Korzh dropped down

behind the boulders. There was a short, dull flame. The grenade splinters rattled as they hit the stones.

"A Mills grenade, probably," said Nugis quietly. Resting his revolver on the crook of his left arm, he took aim at the oarsman.

The shot drew a long spark from the water. The oarsman laughed. He worked his oar energetically and brought the raft to the middle of the stream.

Korzh dropped onto the rocks and tore off his boots. His puttees unwound themselves at his first steps.

"Let's close in from different sides!" he cried to Nugis and went headlong into the water.

"Should I fire?" asked Zimin, running up.

"Wait! Keep your eye on the raft. Watch for my signal!"

Nugis whistled:

"Rex, here!"

From behind the hill Rex could be heard yelping. Without waiting for the dog, Nugis took his revolver between his teeth and jumped into the water.

Korzh used the over-arm stroke, slapping his palms on the water. He was conscious neither of the cold nor of his clothes puffed up around him. Swimming was easy. The water near the bank seemed resilient and dense; with every stroke of his legs the river itself seemed to thrust him out of the water as far as his waist.

The distance between the border jumpers and the guards diminished. The small, angry waves crowded

around Korzh, slapping him on the chest and flinging blobs of dirty foam at him. Every now and then bare twigs suddenly stuck up out of the water or his palm raked up a heavy bunch of sodden grass. Korzh swam on without looking back. He heard Nugis panting and knew that he was right behind him, big, determined and trustworthy.

A strong current caught Korzh and turned him round and round. He tried to resist its gentle but mighty force and suddenly realized that the river was stronger than he. With a smacking, gurgling sound, large whirlpools were swallowing twigs and foam and drawing small logs into their vortex. One of the whirlpools came up to meet Korzh. He strained to the side but his arms no longer obeyed him. The murky water bubbled and frothed.

The whirlpool stood the swimmer almost upright on his feet. For a couple of minutes he twisted around in one spot, trying to free his feet of the terrific pull. Then he saw Nugis' tense face, a branch with black leaves, bits of boards.... He remembered having once heard someone say: never resist a whirlpool. He raised his hands, and immediately an even, wearying ringing in the ears reminded him of the depth.

The undertow dragged him along the stones and threw him up on the surface some ten metres from the raft, deafened and bruised but stubbornly flinging his arms about.

"You won't get me!" Korzh shouted to encourage himself.

Through the slanting sheet of rain he saw the small raft, the grooves left in the water by the rudder and the silhouettes of the men, tensely still. Two were rowing. They strained every muscle to work the short oars, but the raft sat deep in the water and moved only a bit faster than the current.

Realizing that the swimmer was overtaking them, the man at the helm rose. He was broad and tall and looked down at the panting Korzh.

"Hey," said the helmsman softly. "Let's part without bloodshed."

And he stretched out an inordinately long arm to the Red Army man.

"Drop your gun!" answered Korzh, gasping.

"Hey! Go away! I'll cripple you!"

Instead of answering Korzh turned over and began using the side stroke.

"Farewell, bum," said the helmsman distinctly, and for a twinkling his thin face was illumined by the burst.

Two small fountains spurted up near Korzh's shoulder. He dived quickly. The Mauser kept spitting at the water for such a long time that Korzh could hardly hold his breath. When he again raised his head out of the water Nugis was already coming up to the raft from the other side. Nugis was using the breast stroke, and his shoulders rose and fell with remarkable regularity. Near him swam Rex, his ears pointing out of the water like two

slanting sails. The wind blew foam into the dog's nostrils. He whined with impatience and pressed close to his master.

"At them!" said Nugis. The dog spurted forward, overtook the raft and in one leap jumped onto the slippery logs.

Someone exclaimed in fright. Rex's barking mingled with the curses of the men.

The helmsman turned and emptied half his cartridge clip into the dog. A groan broke through Nugis' clenched teeth. He shook his head just as if the shots had entered his own body. It was agonizing for him to hear the dying voice of the dog, to see the bandits finish off his friend with their oars. He brought his head closer to the water and started swimming so energetically that his shoulders left two even grooves in the water.

"Well, he's barked his last!" said the helmsman. "Who's next?"

"You!"

Practically without aiming, the helmsman fired at Korzh, who was then approaching the raft.

"Fire!" shouted Nugis.

The current was carrying them past a stony crag. An echo caught the sounds of the shots, turning them into a long machine-gun burst. At the same time a resonant stream of yellow fire sprang out of the dark.

Machine-gunner Zimin, outstripping the swimmers, had located the raft.

He kept firing almost at random, orientating himself by the silhouettes and the flashes of fire.

The cursing stopped. You could only hear the pouring rain and the wearyingly close whizz of the bullets.

The helmsman towered above the others.... He screamed and clutched at his shoulder. His Mauser splashed into the river.

"If not for that dog, ..." he said sullenly.

"Shut up," Korzh cautioned as he scrambled onto the raft.

Dawn was slowly lighting up the rippled waters. The rain had slackened but the clouds still crowded over the hills, retarding the break of day.

Rex lay on the raft, long and flat. His paws had fallen into the slits between the logs, the water lapped at his bloody body. Nugis was crouching beside him, his hands grasping the wet, still warm fur. His fixed, grey eyes followed the oarsmen, who were dipping their oars unwillingly into the murky water. One of them, unable to meet his sombre glance, looked away.

"He was a good dog," he said to his neighbour.

"Shut up," Nugis said.

Gradually the grey faces of the oarsmen took on a visible outline against the gloomy sky. Five bandits lay prone on the wet logs, and Korzh, small and barefooted, was cautiously covering a detonator with straw.

The border jumpers were silent. They were a mixed, incomprehensible crew in quilted jackets, soft leather



boots and ancient army caps. On Soviet territory any one of them might have passed for a Red Army man on furlough. Incidentally, the old man in a grimy raincoat who was lying at the edge of the raft was the image of a switchman—even down to the copper horn and the flags tucked into his old top boots. The only difference was that this "switchman" wore a Bickford fuse around his waist instead of a belt.

When Korzh turned the old man over on his back and began to unwind the fuse, the border jumper whispered softly:

"Maybe we can come to terms, eh, buddy?"

"Maybe so. . . ."

"Will you take Soviet money?"

"We'll take everything," said Korzh encouragingly. "We'll come to terms at headquarters." Then he turned the old man face down on the logs.

Chapter Nine

Preparations for the celebration were under way at the cottage of the poultry woman, Pilipenko. The entrance hall was strewn with fine fresh straw, embroidered towels hung on the walls, and in the corners glowed grape leaves reddened by the first frost, mint and savoury.

The mistress had stinted nothing. She had even taken out her old and treasured homespun fabrics which were hung up only three times a year: the October holidays,

Christmas Eve and Easter. Their blue, silky texture reminded the old women of the Dnieper, and they would involuntarily break out into one of the songs brought to the East by their grandparents. Their Ukrainian coats and blouses had long fallen to pieces, they now cut their hair differently, and the girls' bead frontlets had been lost. The young people did not know exactly where Nezhin was, or Mirgorod, or Poltava. Only the old folk, when they met of an evening, would recall, like a distant dream, the Poltava cherry trees, the Azov coast, the ocean freighters loaded with bullocks and carts. Still, this was a bit of the Ukraine. The soft speech, the songs, the women's unostentatious beauty and the embroidered towels, the stubbornness of the boys, the high bullock carts and the mouse-coloured oxen all recalled the past. Kushchevka was regarded as a Ukrainian village.

The frontier collective farm named after Semyon Budyonny was expecting guests. It was an old tradition to celebrate the first threshing with horse races, bonfires, songs in the quiet night fields, and strong drinks in every cottage. Straw crackled in every stove, the fat sizzled in skillets, and pillars of smoke buttressed the evening sky.

Squatting down, Pilipenko painted her stove. There were jugs of paint beside her: brews of onion peel, horse-sorrel, clove, alder bark, savoury, watermelon leaves—colours that were vivid and vital, like the mistress herself.

With her soft brush made of a bird's wing she was colouring her stove like an artist. In all the village there was no neater and better housewife than this tall, spare woman. The stove steamed as the colours, one gaudier than the other, appeared on its sides.

Six collective farm women were preparing meat dumplings in the yard. The water in the huge pot was already beginning to boil, and on the tables stood pails of cold beer, jugs of fermented milk and sour cream, bowls of bear meat and fried fish, jellied meats, egg plant, pickled cherries, grated radish, stew and honey. Embroidered towels covered the steaming pies filled with pears, plums, berries, mushrooms, crab apples—with everything the fertile Ussurian earth bore in the fall. But the guests had not yet arrived.

In the pasture, where the whole village was lined up on either side, swords flashed in the sun. Some fancy Caucasian horseback riding was being demonstrated. Quite a number of mounted border guards had come to visit Kushchevka. Among them were Dubakh and two of his young men. They were clean-shaven, in freshly-laundered tunics and boots scratched by the underbrush. Their teeth and eyes sparkled in their weather-beaten faces. Then there was the commandant of the section, Remb, a burly Magyar, and the machine-gunner and sniper Zimin, and the well-known Aitakov brothers, the best horsemen in the detachment, and other commanders who had come for the celebration from the neighbouring borderposts.

Even the old men, who still remembered the fine swordmanship of the Kuban Cossacks, watched the neat strokes of the Aitakov brothers with pleasure. On the gallop one commander jumped on his brother's horse and then climbed on his shoulders, yet the sturdy Don horse continued unconcernedly to take various fences and barriers in his stride.

Then two Ussurian Cossacks, holding an iron pole, galloped past while a third turned somersaults between them. They were followed by one of the Red Army men who had arrived with Dubakh. He rode by, standing on his head. The crowd was about to disperse when a riderless sorrel—only his broad saddle glittered in the sun—suddenly appeared at the edge of the pasture. He sped straight for the enclosure, but before the men could turn him aside a rider popped up from under the horse's belly—a small, wiry rider with the mischievous face of a village boy and a white flower behind one of his prominent ears.

He made a sharp turn and stood at the starting line.

"Go!" cried Dubakh.

The rider started the horse off at a gallop. Then he dropped the reins, and two sabres glittered in his hands.

The smile immediately faded from his lips, his young face grew stern. He rose in his stirrups and the two blades described quick semicircles in the air. Before the rider had seemingly decided from which side to strike, the sliced reeds were already falling. Glistening drops slipped

down to the sabre handles. These had been strokes of imperceptible lightness and rapidity.

The chairman of the collective farm, Semyon Bakovetsky, a lame old man with china-blue eyes who had been a partisan chief, stood near Dubakh. Craning his neck, he soundlessly moved his lips as if the whirlwind of sabres had cast a spell over him.

"Whose boy?" he asked when the last reed had been cut down.

Dubakh put his arms akimbo.

"Can't you tell by the stroke?"

"I can guess."

"I should think so," said Dubakh, twitching his moustache to hide a smile.

Meanwhile the small rider was displaying new miracles. He bent down and whispered something in the horse's willing ear. Submissive to the voice and iron knees, the horse gently dropped on his side and lay motionless. The rider lay prone behind the animal. Only the brim of his cap and the white flower were visible from the road.

A second later the Red Army man was again in the saddle. He dropped his handkerchief—accidentally, as it were—turned, pulled his horse up, and, stooping, picked up the white bit of linen with his teeth.

"Comrade Korzh," said Dubakh when the dare-devil rider had dismounted and come up to the other Red Army men, "the old men want to know what Don village you're from."

"May I report?"

"Only without tricks."

But Korzh greeted Bakovetsky with his usual patter:

"I'm a Vyatka Cossack named Khvatka from Permyatka. The son of a Tambov chief and retired captain of the Kaluga detachment."

Bakovetsky clutched at his hair.

"And he's a machine-gunner in the bargain!" he cried, laughing.

Laughing and joking, the cavalcade moved on to Kushchevka.

The evening was cold and crimson, one of those October evenings when the overwhelming, short-lived beauty of autumn makes itself particularly felt.

Everything was golden, pure and quiet. The birches and the maples had submissively shed their leaves. Only the oaks still burned red, waiting for the first snows. The water glared with an icy eye from depressions in the earth. A lone goose flew low over the treetops, quacking briefly to enhearten itself.

The horsemen trotted slowly. Little boys ran along beside them. The old men in their high, old-fashioned caps walked on unhurriedly. The dandies in their Cossack fur hats perched on the back of their heads walked by the sides of the road to save the shine on their boots. The girls, tittering, walked mincingly behind, their arms intertwined. Behind the whole procession, almost at their very heels, came cyclists.

They were a joyous, strong folk, the descendants of the men who had cleared the taiga with fire and axe.

It was not the custom of the people of Kushchevka to walk in silence; and even the clean, wind-blown fields seemed to beg for a song.

A throaty, mellow voice suddenly rose in song. For a few moments it alone held sway over the rumble of the murmuring crowd. Then gradually other voices joined in, stronger voices. The song widened and ripened, drawing in fresh girlish voices and young basses and an old man's quaver. Like a broad river, the song divided into three streams. Each meandered along in its own way but in harmony with the others. The restless tenors held their own, the basses trumpeted consiliatingly, and the women's voices joined in like the ripple of clear spring water.

Suddenly all grew quiet. Only the song leader, that same throaty, true tenor, carried the song further, over the fields, like a shimmering river. The voice was already dying, falling, without having reached the opposite shore—when suddenly a thousand-voiced chorus thundered out, full-throated. The field again brightened and even seemed to grow warmer.

They entered the village. But the guests did not come to the house of the poultry woman at once. First the hosts wanted to show the commanders the pedigreed Swiss bull, and the Rambouillet sheep, and the hogs, and the Army foals. The visitors also wanted to see the famous flock of geese cared for by Pilipenko, but in the candlelight

they could see only hundreds of open beaks and yellow malicious eyes.

That evening Pilipenko had to borrow tables from her neighbours. Besides the border guards, both invited and uninvited folk thronged the house.

In came Bakovetsky and immediately began to meddle in the cooking. The senior stableman and the biggest talker, Grandad Garbuz, was there. Molodik, the postman, came on his bicycle and brought his friends, while the famous Chernorechye tractor driver Maximyuk came in his own "flivver," which he had packed full of girls. There was the new schoolteacher, a freckled, seventeen-year-old girl, timid in that noisy crowd. The artist Chigirik, who had made sketches of the locality for his painting "Harvesting," dropped in to taste the meat dumplings. The sixty-year-old blacksmith and hunter Chan-shu, with his granddaughter Liu on his shoulders, were the last of the lot.

The girls sat at the bench near the stove.

"This is my daughter," said Pilipenko to the commander. "Perhaps you'll take her to help the sentry? Say 'Hello,' Gapka."

Everybody looked with interest at the bench where Gapka was sharing some home-made chewing gum with her friends. She was a cute thing, short and sturdy like a mushroom. She looked up angrily at Pilipenko and ran out, her firm little heels tapping.

"Oh, what a savage!" said her mother proudly.

They lit the lamps and everybody took their seats at the table, not without first arguing as to who would sit next to the commanders. Then the talk began. From all sides came toasts to the daring border guards, to the People's Commissar, to the hostess.

Korzh could not sit quietly. He was of that fine breed without whom an accordion does not play, beer does not ferment, and girls do not laugh. No sooner had he finished his bowl of meat dumplings than he jumped out into the yard to give the cooks a hand. After him went the Aitakov brothers, machine-gunner Zimin and the young people of Kushchevka. It was no more than a minute before the sound of clapping hands and heels tapping on the ground could be heard from outside. When they started to serve second helpings and Pilipenko went into the yard to bring back those who had strayed out, it was already impossible to get near the Red Army men.

Surrounded by a boisterous crowd, machine-gunner Zimin and Korzh were standing on a bench.

The accordion was rumbling jerkily and the huge Zimin, leaning over Korzh, was bellowing:

They say that lobsters
Whistled under the pines. . . .

The accordion ah'ed in surprise, but Korsh answered without even batting an eyelash:

One fine spring day
Araki decided to take Siberia.

The hound choked on a rag
And passed out at the gates.
Pershance you've heard
Where Hirota hides today?

Suddenly Korzh dropped his hands. The accordion moaned in almost a human voice, pitifully.

"More, more!" shouted the crowd standing in the yard and behind the wattle fence.

"I can't find a rhyme."

"That's enough!" declared Pilipenko, and coolly elbowing her way through the crowd, she marched the singers back into the house.

In the meantime the pails of drinks were emptying. The talk became general. From all sides flew biting remarks about the Japanese. There wasn't a single family in Kushchevka which hadn't lost some member at the hands of the interventionists, either tortured to death or drowned in an ice hole.

The young people blazed with fury, and the old men continued to add fuel to the fire. Under their grey hair, like under grey ashes, gleamed hot the fire of hatred against the Japanese army.

There was a persistent rumour that an entire Japanese regiment had found its grave in the Mongolian Republic, and although nothing definite was known, everyone hastened to express his opinion of the battle.

"They say that fifty airplanes took part in it," said

Grandad Garbuz, "and the enemy was cut to such tiny bits you couldn't tell what'd been an officer and what a horse. . . ."

"What horses? It was a motorized column."

"Let it be even tanks."

"They wanted to cut off Kyakhta, destroy the Chui road and then. . . ."

"And they say that the Mongolian horsemen cut them down."

"And then, making sure of their left flank, they were to go on to the Transbaikal."

"God in heaven!" exclaimed the poultry woman. "If they would only let me lay my hands on one tiny officer."

And she looked down at her dark, gnarled hands.

Someone remarked:

"Then better give him to Bystrykh. . . ."

Everyone turned to look at the one-armed, silent Cossack standing near the stove. What this man had lived through was terrible to think of. Before his eyes they had burned his brother alive and violated his pregnant wife. The Japanese had thought up some ferocious tortures for the prisoner himself. They had dragged him on a rope from ice hole to ice hole, poured urine into his nostrils, cut the skin off his fingers and then held his hands in a solution of sulphuric acid. Only a man who had weathered the hardships of the taiga could have retained his strength and reason after such unbelievable horrors.

Hearing his name, he smiled, showing gold teeth. But he said nothing.

"He's dumb," whispered Gapka to Korzh.

"The Japanese are a strange people," said Grandad Garbuz, who was slightly drunk. "They love children, but they're cruel beyond belief. That one word 'Samurai' speaks for itself. They say harakeri, harakeri.... What does it mean?"

"Savagery."

"No."

"Discipline."

"Insanity."

Everyone hurried to express his opinion. Only Chan-shu remained silent. For the blacksmith they had warmed up beer in a tin mug and roasted some melon seeds. The old man sat among the Kushchevka folk, his blue jacket unbuttoned, dripping with perspiration, happy. Little Liu was asleep on his knees.

At last the guests heard the old man's cough and thin laugh.

"Last winter," he said slowly, "my trap catch fox. All night fox think it over. Then he say: all right, good-bye leg! He chew it off and go away. That Samurai too?"

Everyone laughed.

"No, that's not the same," said Grandad Garbuz. "Let our Comrade Commander explain harakeri."

"Certainly," said Dubakh. And suddenly turning to

Garbuz, he quickly asked: "Which is easier to fell, a pole or a tree?"

"A pole," said the old man.

"Exactly. A pole has no roots. In the same way Japanese patriotism is of a special quality. It has not been nurtured, but dug into the earth forcibly, like a pole. I don't know what science has to say about this but we think that fear lies at the bottom of harakiri. Fear of one's father, of one's schoolteacher, of God, of the most unimportant corporal. Getting down to brass tacks, to the Japanese their motherland is a stepmother. . . ."

Bakovetsky was handed a note. He read it quickly and left the house.

"It's even funny to imagine," said Dubakh, getting up from the table, "that if any of us fell into misfortune he would rip open his belly. Is that heroism?"

"Good God, no!" exclaimed Garbuz, "I wasn't brought up like a Samurai."

"To hell with them!" said Bakovetsky from the door, and, leading Dubakh aside, whispered something to him.

"Where?"

"In Ignat Zakorko's bathhouse."

They went out into the yard and walked through the truck gardens to a dark house at the fringe of the village.

The owner was waiting for them at the gate.

"Here," he said, opening wide the door of a little bathhouse.

On a bench, with his head lowered, sat a man in a

soldier's tunic. At sight of the commander he jumped up and stood to attention.

"Arrest him," said the owner hurriedly. "He's my brother."

"From over there?" the commander asked.

"Honest to God, it wasn't my doing! Tell him, Stepan, did I call you?"

"No," said Stepan, "you didn't."

"You see? What are you standing there for, you devil! Show it. . . ."

Stepan sighed, and, turning his back to the commander, raised his tunic. The turncoat's back was all covered with scabs and red scars.

"I understand," said the commander. "The Japanese?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"For nothing at all—for my garden. I couldn't stand it any more. I'm a Russian, citizen commissar. Arrest me."

"You son of a gun!" said Bakovetsky passionately. "It evidently took the Japanese ramrod to make your conscience speak!"

Chapter Ten

. . .The familiar stony path ran along the seashore. It jumped from stone to stone, crept stealthily along the edge of the precipice and disappeared in thickets only to appear suddenly again, sly, gilded with pine needles and the sun.

Looking at it, Sato decided that the time had come to discard his shoes. He had bought a fine pair of sandals soled with woven straw when he was still in port. With what joy he would have thrown off right now the stub-nosed shoes and the stinking socks! Sato had even crouched down on the rocks and started to undo his puttees but caught himself in time. No, he would come home in full military regalia, in his army jacket buttoned up on all its five buttons, in his loose trousers, puttees and torn shoes (the sergeant major had proved rather close-fisted and had taken away the new ones). Despite the regulations, he had not even removed the shoulder straps with the three stars, to which only a corporal was entitled.

Sato thought with relief that he would never again see the continent with its dreary hills, clay fortresses and rust-coloured grass. He even turned around, as if to take a last look at the steep shores of Korea, but the sea was as boundless as the joy that filled the heart of the soldier on leave.

Misty, new-born clouds hung over the water, shot with the rays of morning. The waves lapped timidly at the wet stones where blood-red crabs were warming their armour-clad backs in the sun. Over them seagulls were darting back and forth. Their short cries sounded like the scraping of pulleys on sailboats.

Sato walked on and laughed aloud. The wet nets drawn across the path flapped in his face. He did not even try to avoid them. He inhaled the smell of Hokkaido emanat-

ing from these nets, the smell of ochre, tar, fish and seaweed. Two more promontories, the swaying rope bridge —and he would see his home.

He passed the fishermen. The tall fellows in their blue overalls with the master's trademark on the back pushed the boats off into the crystal clear water. They were hurrying to sea to remove the seines bursting under the weight of the fish.

Sato recognized Yaritomo by his green corduroy trousers: two years before at the market in Hokkaido they had chosen the same trousers and knives with handles fashioned like dolphins. Of course, Yaritomo had drowned near Kamchatka in a heavy storm, but Sato was not in the least surprised to see the "drowned man" smoking his pipe on the stern of the boat. Skipper Dono had told them about the storm—and everybody knew how he liked to exaggerate.

He turned his eyes to another boat and soon found the grey head of the skipper himself. Near him, for some reason, sat the company scribe and Miyako, the stutterer.

The boats pulled out in a file and were hidden in the mist, a sure sign of a sultry day.

"*Ano-ne*!" shouted Sato through cupped palms.

The fishermen raised their heads. Evidently no one recognized Sato in this manly soldier weighed down with two trunks. Only Dono shouted something in answer to his greetings. The skipper waved his hand and the flotilla vanished in the sparkle of the sunbeams.

How difficult it is to find something to talk about after you've been away for a long time! The last half hour Sato and his father have been exchanging monosyllabic exclamations.

The shutters are thrown open. The new mats shine. The father wants all the people in the village to see his son in his military jacket, cap with the red brim, and the corporal's stars on his shoulder straps. With trembling hands stained red with ochre, he heaps coal in the brazier, reaches for a porcelain flask of sake and sits down opposite his son.

They sit silently with their hands stretched over the brazier, soldiers, heroes of two wars, and listen to the crackle and music of the coal fire. Sato's sister, little Yukiko, moves so quickly around the room that her kimono hardly has time to fall and cover her bare heels.

She places before her brother a bowl of noodles, radish, salted shrimps, and smoked Russian sturgeon—a delicacy that is only for their father.

They are silent. They have been separated so long that the father does not even know what to speak of to his successful son.

"Your feet probably froze," he says, looking down at Sato's shoes.

"No, we got accustomed to the cold," says Sato carelessly.

Meanwhile the house is filling with guests. Among them are apothecary Watari, basketweaver Sudzumoto and

skipper Kimura. Fortune-teller Hayama comes in. He is a tall, sloppy old man in a derby, who had foretold Sato a life full of adventures and changes. Hayama is glad that his words have come true so soon. He pats Sato on the back, exuding with each breath the odour of stale liquor. The father, trying to look affable, watches with anguish and bitterness as Mr. Hayama unceremoniously takes the bowl with noodles and sucks down the starchy strips with a whistling sound. If the others don't start, this glutton will eat up all the shrimps, the salted almonds and the sturgeon, he thinks.

But Yukiko is already moving back from the doorway, bowing and mumbling greetings. The scribe himself, having heard of Sato's arrival, has come to pay his respects to the new hero. Wiping his dour face with a checkered handkerchief, he greets everyone present and leers at the pretty Yukiko.

With the scribe comes the teacher of caligraphy, the puny Mr. Yamadzaki, who has a huge Adam's apple and a wide mouth in which the teeth seem to have been thrust haphazardly. Sato greets him most deferentially. Next to his father the old *sen-sei** is for him the most honoured person in the village.

The warmed sake loosens the guests' tongues. Sato is waiting for their questions about his army service and about the army's latest heroic exploits, but the guests vie

* Teacher.

with one another for a chance to relate their own experiences.

"Before they go into battle," recalls Mr. Yamadzaki, "the Russians warm their coats over a bonfire. Once, near Kuachenza. . . ."

At last Sato has a chance to speak, but all the stories he had so elaborately prepared as he walked up the path have flown out of his head.

"They have three-motored airplanes," he begins unpropitiously. "We used to see them every day. . . ."

"They bought them on the money they got for the Chinese railway!" rages the teacher. "They bought them in France. Did you see the French signs painted over?"

"No. They were very high up."

There is a pause.

"I always said he would rise in the world," mumbles Mr. Hayama, scratching his back casually.

"Have you heard the news?" asks the scribe. "The police officer Miura died today. They say it was a heart attack. He has been terribly worried these days."

Undoubtedly Mr. Miura, who was fond of gaiety and women, died of too much drink rather than of overworry, but they deferentially bow their heads.

"Now there is a vacancy. . . . If one is persistent enough and has a good recommendation. . . ."

Everybody looks significantly at Sato. His father proudly, the neighbours respectfully, Yukiko fearfully.

She can't picture her brother with Mr. Miura's fat, red neck.

"I shall have to think it over," says Sato importantly, although he feels that he'd like to run to the office immediately. "I shall think it over," he repeats, enjoying the impression he is creating.

Suddenly the teacher rises, and, clutching Sato by his shoulders with his skinny claws, shouts angrily into his ear:

"Now, what do you think of that! He wants to think it over.... Get up! Lively there!"

Suddenly everything disappears: the sea in the bright sunlight, the path, the fishermen, his father, the scribe, Yukiko....

The light in the barracks is dim. The lantern on the ceiling flickers feebly. The sergeant major, having torn the blanket off, is shaking Sato roughly by the shoulder. With a single movement Sato pulls on his trousers.

Half a company is lined up in the yard near the barracks. Until the order "Shoulder arms!" is given, the soldiers rub their ears and pinch their shoulders and thighs, trying to shake off their drowsiness. Snowflakes are whirling about.

"They s-say the Reds have begun an offensive," whispers Miyako, his teeth chattering.

"But there is still no...."

"Stop talking! Shoulder arms!"

The sergeant major reads the roll call. The chilled

voices of the soldiers sound like sharp barks in the cold air. The riflemen await orders at attention, afraid to touch their frostbitten ears.

The lieutenant hurriedly explains the coming mission.

"... Taking advantage of the government's peaceable intentions, the Russians have violated the border and seized part of the territory of Manchukuo, from the mill to Marker No. 17.... To the soldiers of the Second Company has fallen the honour to prove to the Russians just what the true spirit of the sons of Yamato means. Move in absolute silence. It is possible that there will be a battle with superior enemy forces. Wear metal helmets. Do not use your ear muffs."

The soldiers trot into the gully, cross the road and penetrate deep into the woods. It is warmer and quieter here. The stars are barely visible through the tangle of black branches. The dry leaves crackle underfoot. The strong, biting, frosty air, their rapid movement and the obscurity of their objective go like wine to Sato's head. He feels that his cheeks are burning.

They march for a long time. Sweat penetrates through the men's coats and covers the cloth with rime. The forest has long disappeared in the cold mist. In single file they pass between cliffs and along the dry bed of a stream. Ice cracks under their feet and the sergeant major is constantly raising a warning hand.

Then the soldiers crawl endlessly through thickets

where water oozes up despite the frost. Sato's gloves become soaking wet. He feels the moisture penetrating the reinforced cloth on his knees.

Ahead lies a meadow wedged into the woods. On the right, out of the darkness, looms the roof of the mill. This is where the border passes.

Sato looks with excitement at the high marker painted in white and green stripes. The iron emblem is so high that even if you stretched your hand up you could not reach it. The Russians must be smart indeed to have captured the meadow so quickly.

"Here!" the sergeant major whispers. "Inspect your weapons. Get your grenades ready!"

Two go off to reconnoitre: Corporal Akita and Private Miyako. The fog opens before them and immediately swallows them up.

Lying in the coarse grass, the soldiers look at the marker and rub their frozen fingers.

Chapter Eleven

"Quiet!" pleaded Nugis.

He bent over the old six-tube radio set, trying to catch Moscow.

That was no easy matter. Ever since Ilka had broken the sixth tube Moscow had moved off an additional thousand miles.

"... wave len ... broad. ..."

Eight shadows on the ceiling froze; even the domino players were careful not to slap down their dominoes. Somewhere, from above the oaks surrounding the border-post, came the quiet voice of Moscow:

"...ed Square... king...."

Again the pig squeals, clicks, and the dots and dashes of the Morse code answered the touch of Nugis' patient fingers. On the October holidays hundreds of stations were busier than usual.

In Vladivostok a Chinese theatre was performing, and a tambourine tinkled. The throaty falsetto of a singer resembled the sounds coming from a fife whittled from a willow twig.

In Khabarovsk the microphone was put up in the city garden, on a crag overlooking the Amur, and the announcer was briskly reporting:

"I see a boat with flags on the stern. All the oarsmen are wearing blue berets. There go four motor boats with masked people. Here is a steamship passing... and on the deck they are dancing a mazurka. And here...."

"...Lieutenant Vdovtsov will now sing Jose's Aria," announced the radio station in the city of Klimovsk. "At the piano is Claudia Semyonovna Vorobyova, the wife of an army engineer."

At the radio studio in Nikolayevsk-on-Amur a group of old partisans had gathered. A hoarse, elderly bass, interrupted now and then by the Morse code, slowly related:

"... Then, leaving six wounded in the backwaters, we decided to give battle and make our way to Comrade Shilov. In the morn...."

"Turn it back!" cried Korzh. "Let's hear the partisan."

"I want to hear about the Japanese," said Ilka.

But Nugis only shook his square head. He was in a terrific hurry. In front of him lay his watch. It was a quarter to five, local time, and about ten o'clock, Moscow time.

The parade was to begin any minute now. Nugis stubbornly tried to reach Moscow through the call signals of steamships sailing along the Pacific coast and through the fox trots in the Harbin cafés. Captains of crab fishing boats congratulated each other and inquired about the catch; a Japanese announcer was constantly repeating an advertisement; radiomen announced that ice floes had again appeared in Olga bay.

But Moscow, at the other end of the world, was silent.

The men sat in a circle around Nugis; their faces were solemn, and they were dressed in freshly-laundered tunics. The machine-gunners, snipers, riflemen and others all patiently awaited the end of Nugis' travels through the ether.

"Tap the tubes," advised the cook. "Sometimes they go cold."

They raised the cover and Nugis gently snapped his

fingers against the tubes, which emitted a feeble golden glow.

There was a deafening roar. It was a dog howling outside. Everybody laughed boisterously.

Nugis was chagrined by his failure. He rose and put his watch away.

"As you were!" announced Korzh.

"I'll go and see if I can find some spare tubes," said Nugis doggedly.

"But the men no longer had any confidence in the old radio set. One of the machine-gunners remarked:

"Again we missed the parade!"

"If we could at least have heard the tanks."

"At home in Verkhniye Kuty they're making pancakes today," machine-gunner Zimin said unexpectedly.

This casual statement seemed to push aside the walls of the barracks. At once the men saw the Barabinsk steppes, Novosibirsk, Smolensk, Sverdlovsk, Poltava, Yelabuga—all that lay on the other side of the taiga. Everyone wanted to say something pleasant about his native town or village.

"At home in Murmansk every mast has a star on it," said Belik. "In the daytime there are flags, and at night electric lights. The icebreaker *Chaika* hung up a portrait of Budyonny. All made of fish scales.... You would swear it was silver. The Norwegians had pasted it together back home in Tromsö and presented it to the fishermen. The manager of the port wanted to send it to the Tretyakov Gallery but the icebreaker would not give it up."

The cook wanted to tell them just exactly what kind of scales the portrait was made of, but Garmiz interrupted him.

"No, you listen to me!" he shouted, jumping up on a stool. "What is Murmansk! Did you ever see Lagodekh? Have you ever walked through Gambora at night? There's a meadow there where every tree is at least a thousand years old. Even more! Two and a half thousand! We dance all night long. Down below on the roads the ox carts creak as they pass, carrying grapes and wine to the city.... Then we take the girls home. The nights are dark in the hills. The lanterns almost reach to the stars. If you shout, a thousand echoes answer.... Just listen! And what a wind! You lean back over a precipice, throw your arms out—and the wind will support you all day long! There!"

Garmiz flung out his arms and looked at everybody with a challenge in his eyes: "I dare you to doubt the force of the Gambora winds!"

No one answered. Siberians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Tatars—men with hands scratched by the stones, branches and pine needles—sat lost in thought. Even the restless Korzh, unable to live a moment without a wisecrack, was silent.

Perched on a stool, he was trying to imagine what was happening then at his home. He had so rarely visited the village that he could not visualize immediately just what his father would be doing that day.

... Now it is ten o'clock in the morning. Probably father and Pavel are in the smithy.... The smithy is low-ceilinged, as if it had been cut out of one huge piece of coal.... Through the open doors he could see the forge, the hands flying over the anvil. When the hammer fell he could see his father's face—black, with thick soldierly moustaches over gleaming teeth....

Little, long-armed Pavel is working the bellows. Like everyone else in the Korzh family, he has light, mischievous eyes and a broad mouth. He jumps on one leg, whistles, and fearlessly pushes his short forceps into the hottest part, where the iron is growing a delicate pink.

It's good to look at the father and son as they both hammer at a thick strip and the iron wriggles, twists, reddens, and then turns into a hook for a tractor or a coupling-bolt for a waggon.

But—there's no work on a day like this! Most likely they are all sitting at the table. Mother has scraped the boards with a piece of glass, taken out the birch-bark sugar bowl and the blue....

"Attention! This is Red Square," came softly from the loudspeaker. "All eyes are turned... assky tower.... In...utes...gins the parade."

Korzh jumped up. Everybody turned to the loudspeaker.

"I didn't mean it!" cried Ilka, hurriedly drawing away her hand.

Moscow was speaking. The voice of the announcer came through faintly, as though carried off by the wind. He described everything: the spaciousness of the square and the freshness of the autumn morning, the Kremlin stars glittering in the sun, the arrival of the delegations, the steel helmets of the infantry, the statues opposite the gates of the Spassky tower; he gave the names of the people standing at the Kremlin walls, names known to everyone from Chukotka to mountainous Svanetia.

The number of troops grew. The grandstands began to buzz. Someone was being cheered; the musicians were tuning up. A faint murmur came from Red Square.

Suddenly everything grew quiet, like in a field. At the other end of the world a clock was leisurely chiming the hour.

"Ten," said Belik quietly, and all the men heard the distant clatter of hoofs.

Voroshilov rode past, reviewing the troops; he greeted and congratulated them. The Square answered him full-throated, briefly, as one man.

Then they heard the hollow voice of the People's Commissar. He spoke slowly, distinctly and so simply that one forgot the solemnity of the occasion. He reminded them of what had been accomplished that year, of the people's might and single will. His last words, addressed to the Red Army, were lost in the rumble of static: it was as if guns all over the country were thundering a salute.

Dubakh tiptoed in and sat down behind the men. Ilka jumped up on his knees.

"Is a tank bigger than a horse?" she asked.

"Sh . . . sh. . . . Bigger."

"Then it's more important. And why did the academy march first? Is it bigger than a tank?"

Looking stern, Dubakh put his hand over Ilka's mouth. Through the music of the march they could distinctly hear measured treads. It was the infantry marching, thousands of feet moving in step.

"Comrade Commander," asked Korzh, "which comes first, the artillery or the cavalry?"

Dubakh thought for a moment. He had never seen a parade in Moscow and was ashamed to admit it. He had travelled much, but always at the borders. He was more familiar with Negoreloye, Grodekovo or Kushku than with Moscow.

"It all depends," he answered cautiously. "As for today, I don't know."

A shower of sound beat down on the stones of Red Square: it was the cavalry galloping. The machine-gun limbers flew like whirlwinds toward the Moscow River.

Then there was a long pause. Strange, barely audible sounds were snorting their way out of Moscow.

"The whole square is full of trucks," explained the announcer.

"Now the howitzers are moving, on rubber-tired carriages."

Suddenly a strange roar burst into the barracks; it sounded as if a long piece of canvas were being ripped over Moscow.

"Did you hear that?" the announcer asked quickly. "That's a fighter plane. It looks like...."

His voice was drowned in the deep roar of propellers and the clanging of tank treads. There was no end to the sheet of canvas being ripped over the Square.

"Nineteen ... twenty ... twenty-seven .... forty two...." counted Belik, "forty-three ... fifty!"

"Here's a real dreadnought!" exclaimed the announcer. "It has four turrets. The windowpanes in our building are trembling!"

They lit the lamp. They closed the shutters. Eight army men—Siberians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians—stood on the Square.

They saw everything: Stalin, his hand raised, standing on the granite platform of the mausoleum, the endless human flood illumined by the sun, the Red Guards with grey temples, the steelmakers, the People's Artists, the proud builders of the Moscow underground railway, the Academicians, old weavers, children perched on their fathers' shoulders, the hundreds of thousands of faces turned to the Kremlin.

They would have stood on Red Square to the end of the celebration, but the radio battery was noticeably fading; the sounds of the demonstration grew fainter and fainter, as if Moscow were moving farther and farther

away, to the very edge of the world; and finally the loudspeaker fell silent....

"Semichasny, Kulkov and Uvarov, on detail duty!" cried the man on duty.

* * *

The soft tinkle of the field telephone roused Dubakh from his nap. Without opening his eyes he stretched his hand and took up the receiver. The sentry at the gate was speaking.

"Two women with a horse and cart want to see you personally. Shall I admit them?"

"Let them come in," said the commander, ruthlessly twisting his ear to wake up. He had been sitting over an old self-instructor of English. The lamp had grown dim. Streaks of dawn filtered in through the shutters.

Dubakh was already dressed before the sentry had shut the gates behind the women. He turned his pocket flashlight on them as they came up.

One of them, the poultry woman of the neighbouring collective farm, he knew. He had spoken often and gladly with this good housewife, listening patiently to her long tales of how her husband had been drowned in an ice hole by the interventionists. She was an experienced, sensible woman. She knew a sure cure for malanders and for worms in dogs. Dubakh did not hesitate to go to her for advice.

But he did not recognize her companion at first, a

young girl with a grim, frightened face, dressed in a quilted coat and men's soft leather boots.

"Oh, how terrible!" said Pilipenko as soon as the commander appeared on the porch. "Oh, mother o'mine! Oh, come here quick, Comrade Commander!"

"What's all the fuss about?" asked Dubakh. "Where'd you get these heavy sticks?"

"Oh, my God! If only you knew.... Just look!"

Still holding the sticks, the woman went up to the cart and pulled away the straw. A pair of spindly legs in trailing puttees, a short, green army jacket, and the face of a Japanese infantryman rigid with strain met his eyes. The man was bound with reins and half-smothered with the cap stuffed in his mouth as a gag.

"Here's the rascal!" said the poultry woman, breathing anger and excitement. "And here's his sword. This dirty rat ripped my coat to pieces!"

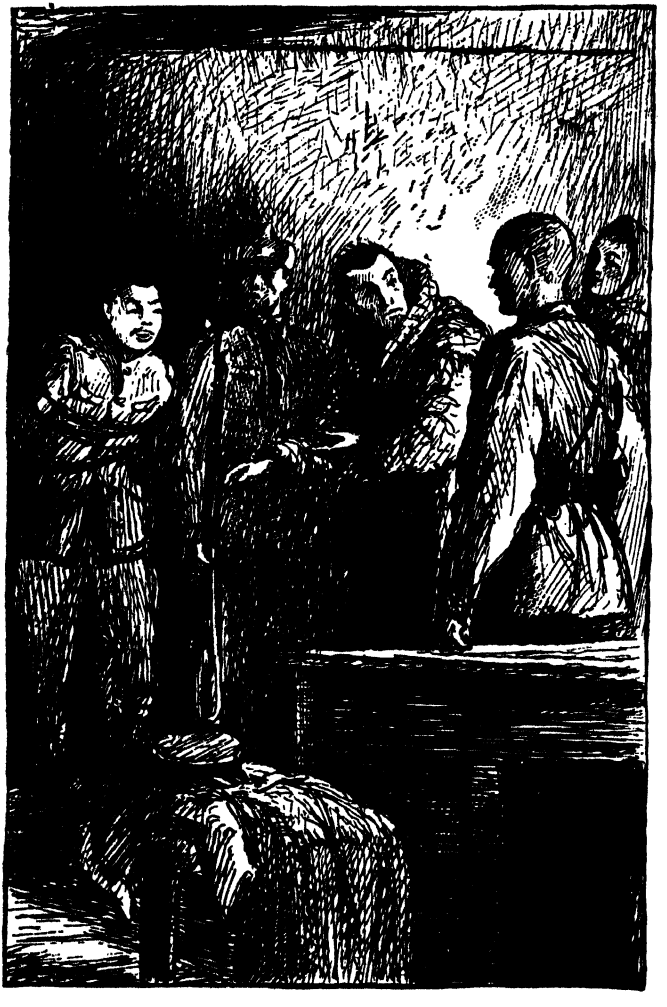
Then, in a loud whimper, she began to tell the story.

She was going to town with her daughter. On the way the girl fell asleep under her sheepskin. They were passing through the oak grove.... No, not near the mill.... She herself was also dozing. Suddenly this rascal, this scorpion, this dirty rat with a sword, this Japanese officer, up and says....

"Come into the office," Dubakh suggested to Pilipenko.

The poultry woman was talking so loud that half-dressed men began to jump out of the barracks.

The sight of Dubakh's desk, with its papers and an



inkwell of malachite stone, a present from Urals quarriers, prompted Pilipenko to assume a more official tone.... Let the Comrade Commander write it all down. And let them tell the Marshal himself about it. Had it not been for Gapka, she would have remained in the woods and the spy would have blown up the bridge.... When she stopped the horse he had asked in Russian where Kushchevka was and then like a madman had turned on her with his sword. Luckily the road was clayey and the rascal slipped. The officer only scratched her neck and ripped open her leather jacket. They fell right on the cart, on top of Gapka, and in her sleep the girl grabbed hold of the Jap so tightly that the rascal dropped his sword. He scratched and bit Gapka's arm but the women managed nonetheless to bind the officer with the reins.

"He's a private," remarked Dubakh.

The middle-aged woman in fur boots and open leather jacket showing a strong throat, glanced at the prisoner.

"And I say he's an officer," she insisted. "Isn't that right, daughter?"

"Officer," said Gapka, looking respectfully at her mother.

"He understands Russian...."

"*Skosi mo vakarimasen,*"* said the soldier hastily. "I lost my way."

"That's evident," remarked Dubakh. "It's four kilometres from here to the border."

* I don't understand.

"That's enough from you!" shouted Pilipenko, glaring at the close-cropped head of the soldier. "I know better. I can recognize rank. Three stars is an officer, a stripe is a captain."

"Mama," Gapka suddenly said in a bass voice. "Maybe he's crazy?"

She pointed with alarm at the red scratches on her strong, brown arm. Fright and anxiety for her daughter made Pilipenko cry.

Ilka's nurse, Stepanida Semyonovna, calmed the women. She took them to her room, washed the scratches with arnica and put up the tea kettle to boil.

They sat for a long time discussing the details of the attack and waiting for Dubakh. The poultry woman recalled how fifteen years ago the Japanese had chopped a hole in the ice and forced her husband into it. The Argun was a shallow river, the wind blew off the snow, and all the passers-by could see her Ignat looking at the sun from under the ice. In the daytime they did not dare cut out the corpse. She came in the night on a sledge, bringing a candle and an axe. She brought her husband home frozen like a lump of ice and buried him in the yard.

She turned to Gapka to show what a fine girl she had nonetheless brought up, but her daughter had not been listening to the conversation. She had fallen asleep on the commander's couch, forgetting all about the officer and the bite on her arm.

Chapter Twelve

It was growing light. From the dry grass came the cries of pheasants. The north wind—a herald of the dawn—rushed noisily through the oak grove; the overripe acorns fell to the ground with a rattle.

The soldiers shivered as they lay in the tall rimy grass. They rubbed their ears with their woollen gloves and tried to pull the skirts of their short coats over their knees. But the lieutenant demonstratively left off his goatskin mittens. He sat on his haunches, evoking the admiration of the corporals by his hardiness; occasionally he thrust his hands into his coat pockets, where two velvet-covered warming pads lay.

Akita had not yet returned. The best time was slipping by, and the soldiers' vodka-induced patience was wearing off. The lieutenant had ordered two soldiers to dig up the border marker without making any noise and lay it in the grass. Now Amakasu looked with vexation at the pole. Hardly worth freezing half a company for two hours for such a trifle!

He closed his eyes and tried to picture what would follow.... By dawn he would have driven back the force in observation and come out to the highway. The machine-gun nests would remain two kilometres to the left. The borderpost would put up a stiff fight; the Russians were accustomed to passive defence.... By that time the colonel would have received the report of events *post fac-*

tum. He could clearly visualize the subsequent communiqué of the Soviet ambassador, printed in small type in the evening editions, and the evasive, surprised tone of the minister's answer.

Only caution held Amakasu back. Common sense is the weapon of the strong.

Amakasu nonetheless wavered somewhat. The silence of the enemy was more dangerous than the rattle of machine guns.

At last Corporal Akita appeared. His story was replete with details, but disconnected. He and Miyako had gone all through the woods, from the salt marshes to the borderpost. They had met no details. The windows at the borderpost showed no light. Then they separated.... They could hear a peasant cart passing.

"Why a peasant cart?" asked the lieutenant irritably.

"It smelled of hay, and two women were talking."

"You smell of stupidity!"

"It is not for me to say, Lieutenant."

"Where is Miyako? Think hard.... Well?"

"Probably lost his way," said the corporal, after thinking a bit. "He's waiting for the dawn to find his bearings."

The reconnaissance was clearly a failure but they could wait no longer. Amakasu gave the order to start moving.

* * *

Two dull explosions lifted the guard on duty off his stool. That was a grenade signal from Semichasny's detail: "Danger! Expecting help! The border has been violated!"

The men jumped up from their cots and threw off their blankets. They did not light the lamps. They knew where to lay their hands on everything in the dark. They quickly found their rifles and sabres, and collected their cartridge bags and grenades. The clatter of hobnailed boots, the click of rifle bolts and the swish of capes could be heard in the dark. Men who had fallen asleep only an hour before and those who had already rested the allotted time grabbed their weapons and dashed out into the yard, putting on their greatcoats on the run.

They moved with the habitual speed and precision characteristic only of border guards and sailors.

In a minute a squad had occupied the trenches in front of the borderpost. In three a small detachment of cavalrymen, with three machine guns strapped to their saddles, was galloping to the salt marshes.

The signal from Semichasny, barely audible at a distance of two kilometres, reached the neighbouring borderposts as an echo. The men of the Kazachka post were already saddling their horses when the men on duty at Gremuchi and Malenki gave the alarm. Here too everything was found in the dark: the Mausers, the saddles, the machine-gun cartridges, the paths, the favourite boulders of the snipers, the hills which had been their target at hundreds of drills.

Guards led their silent dogs out onto the paths. Horsemen went galloping down the gullies, taking streams and driftwood obstacles at a leap. Machine-gunners merged with the rocks and the pine trees or vanished in the grass.

Finally dozens of men heard some haphazard, vague sounds—as if woodpeckers had decided to call to each other in the night.

Half an hour passed. The neighbouring borderposts, which had sent out larger details, continued to wait. None had the right to send all their forces to Kazachka and leave their posts exposed.

Suddenly a green rocket rose silently in the air. Describing a huge, slow arc, it coloured the tops of the oaks and the forest glade with its ghastly light. For a moment the woodpeckers were stupefied, but then began pecking away even more frantically. Dubakh phoned the commander of the detachment.

"Snow is falling in Minsk," he warned calmly. The commander was so interested in the weather report that he immediately shared the news with the cavalry troop and with an air unit some 100 kilometres from the border.

"Two squadrons to Minsk, ride hard!" he ordered the cavalry troop. "I warn you that snow is falling in Minsk," he announced to the commander of the air unit.

"Warming up," was the laconic reply.

...The rest of the Maritime area was quiet. Threshers were rumbling in the fields near Chernigovka. Poset fisher-

men cursed the cold as they took out to sea. At the Amur docks electrical welders working under the open sky were making stars brighter than Vega and Sirius. The pilot of a mail plane noted the fiery breath of dozens of locomotives: trains were carrying oil, Mariupol steel, Tashkent grapes, textbooks, Moscow automobiles. Sixty kilometres away from the fighting a fisherman was crossing a lake to get tea at a village and to bring in squirrel skins; he frightened the stupid fish with his oars and sang as he rowed, revelling in the quiet of the autumn morning.

Not a single tarpaulin was removed that night from the guns of the fortified area.

Mother Hill was like a Cossack saddle—a broad hill covered with tawny grass, it lay between Goat and Rice hollows. The right side of this saddle rested against a stream; to the left lay a stretch of dewberry bushes and the salt marshes, a scabrous bit of land, trampled and dug up by wild animals.

Naked dwarf oaks stood on the other side of the border, separated from the hill by a broad meadow. The grass on the meadow and the hills had never been mown. The rust-coloured earth that had never felt the touch of a ploughshare had a primeval strength. Brambles grew the height of a horse, and daisies flourished more luxuriantly than sunflowers. Sorrel, lillies, chickweed, pigweed, buttercups and pinks vied with one another in toughness, colouring and the relentlessness with which they choked

one another. Sometimes the daisies conquered and the meadow looked chaste and severe. At other times the marsh rosemary ignited it with a purple flame or the marigold gilded the hills a coppery yellow. By autumn this variegated assemblage faded and coarsened into a thick, dusty carpet.

...The cavalrymen dismounted at the rice field behind the hill. Soon their three machine guns opened fire from the stony crest at the Japanese platoon flanking the hill. The pincers opened, freeing Semichasny's detail, which had been pressed to the ground by the fire of the Japanese machine guns.

It was a long time before Korzh could catch his breath after he dropped down in the hoary grass among the rocks. His heart beat wildly after his mad gallop. It seemed they had run their horses to the limit. Yet they had come too late. Kulkov, the song leader and editor of their newspaper, the carpenter from Tambov, lay prone with his fingers clutching the grass and his cheek against the earth as if he were trying to determine whether or not they were coming. Ognev's arm lay twisted to the side, a bullet hole through it.

Belik and Bars, the messenger dog, were lying near Korzh. The alarm had reached the cook in the kitchen, and he did not even have time to take off his apron. Now he was helper to the machine-gunner. Quickly connecting the exhaust tube, he put the cartridge box in place and helped Korzh pull the belt through.

The three machine guns combed the grass behind the salt marshes. The Japanese answered back from the other side of the meadow distinctly and resonantly. Bullets ricochetted on the slate slabs behind Korzh.

Half an hour passed. Suddenly Dubakh, lying some twenty metres from Korzh, rose and cried out:

"Stop!"

The machine guns spluttered and stopped. A jaunty soldier in a helmet and a short coat came out of the oak grove waving a white flag. The grass rose up to his helmet, which wobbled as he walked, like a tortoise in water. Burdock clung to his uniform.

The infantryman clambered up the hill and silently handed Dubakh a note.

It was written in Russian, in block letters, and sounded derisive.

"To the Russian Commander (Commissar). I most humbly command you immediately to cease fire and return to the borderpost. Preserving the lives of the brave Russian soldiers, I remain, most hopefully,

Amakasu."

"An amazing note," grumbled Dubakh, frowning. "You desire to brazen it out to the bitter end?"

"*Vakarimasen*," said the soldier quickly. "*Dozo okakinasai.*"*

* I don't understand. Write it out.

Dubakh tore a page out of his notebook and also printed in block letters.

"Will not enter into negotiations on our territory. Regard your detachment as a band of diversionists."

Then, as an afterthought, he added:

"Most humbly command you to cease your provocation."

The puny soldier saluted and with a dignified air began to sink into the tall weeds. Korzh followed him with his eyes. It was the first time he had seen a Japanese so close.

"Young, but what a husky," he jeered.

At the enemy's left flank a little flag with a red disc was raised. Several bullets whizzed over the crest of the hill.

Along the ridge the command was passed from machine gun to machine gun:

"Fire!"

"At the approaching group—in bursts—half a belt! Fire!"

"Fire!" cried Korzh, and the machine gun trembled with his impatience and fury.

Dubakh did not stay in one place. His low voice was to be heard on the left fringe of the valley, near machine-gunners Zimin and Garmiz, and then near the stream where Squad Commander Nugis and a group of men were pressing against the Japanese flank.

With his moustache, broad raincoat and sun-bleached cap Dubakh resembled a peaceful village postman. His cold pipe protruded from his mouth.

He gave his commands as calmly as though this were target drill rather than a battle against half a company of Japanese riflemen. In thirty minutes he had managed to shift the positions of the machine guns and the direction of the fire several times. These tactics had the twofold advantage of preventing the enemy from adjusting fire and of confusing him in regard to the number of firing points on the hill.

Watching Dubakh, the men's spirits rose, for the large number of Japanese-Manchurian troops had at first slightly disconcerted them.

Their commander never once raised his voice, but his cold pipe whistled louder and louder. The position of the border guards was far from comforting. Nugis had managed to cross the stream and wipe out a machine-gun crew as it was replacing the barrel of its gun, but one squad could not hold back half a company of Japanese riflemen.

More and more often in the intervals between machine-gun bursts Dubakh strained his ears for the sound of hoofs in Goat Hollow.

"Korzh has shifted his fire to the right," reported a squad commander. "Zimin is eliminating a stoppage."

Dubakh did not answer immediately. Sitting on his haunches, he was spitting, and blood foamed from his

mouth. Reading Dubakh's lips, the squad commander caught the order:

"Along the whole line—sweeping fire!"

The commander was brought down to the hollow where the horses were standing. The men unbuttoned his shirt and began to bandage him, but suddenly Dubakh tore away, and, with his hairy chest exposed, all covered with blood and the bandage trailing after him, crawled back on all fours to the hill. He still had enough strength to crawl into a pit and give the order for a change of position. Dubakh was troubled about the neighbouring Zatilikha Hill. It guarded the entrance to the gully, and the helmeted figures were pressing most stubbornly against it. Then it occurred to him to write a note to Platoon Commander Yerokhin. Wincing, he dug into his map case and suddenly crumpled up, burying his nose in his knees.

Amakasu was jubilant at Dubakh's answer. It gave him satisfaction to note the firm handwriting and resolute tone of the reply. It would have been too bad if the Russians retreated without giving battle. To stick with half a company of riflemen to one spot near the marker was silly enough, but to move off into the unknown, risking the lives of the soldiers, would have been still worse.

The voices of the machine guns ringing in unison in-

spired the lieutenant with confidence in a happy outcome for the operation.

Yet the skirmish was dragging out. On the right flank, near the salt marshes, lay a platoon of Manchurians. As long as they were not ordered to advance, the soldiers fought not badly. Many of them fired at random in the old bandit fashion, resting their rifle butts against their thighs. They had found quite comfortable shelters and were ready to continue the skirmish until dinner time if necessary.

Like all peasants they were inherently cautious, sluggish, and absolutely devoid of military reflexes. They lent a more attentive ear to the whistle of the bullets than to the corporal's commands.

At last the Manchurians' pretence at action drove the lieutenant into a fury: he ordered a machine gun brought up behind the platoon. Only then did the soldiers, hugging the ground, move slowly toward the hill. At the fringe of the salt marshes they stopped again. The defeat of the Lyan army at Jalainor* was still fresh in the memory of the Manchurians. No threats could make the soldiers budge even an inch.

Lying on the second line, Sato watched Amakasu with admiration. The lieutenant sat upright, paying no heed to the dust kicked up by the machine guns of the border guards. From under his green celluloid eyeshade

* Conflict on the Chinese Eastern Railway with the White Chinese in 1929.

protruded a frostbitten nose and a tin whistle, to the tune of which the corporals crawled up to him. Occasionally he gave orders in his usual gruff, quick patter.

Noticing the adoring glance of the soldier, Amakasu held up a crooked finger. He summoned privates second class Tarada and Kondo as well, and in a few vigorous sentences explained the soldiers their assignment.

"The bravery of the Russians is deceptive," Amakasu declared. "The Russian machine-gunners are either drunk or crazy with fear. To bring them to, you must cut across the salt marshes, get to the machine-gunner on the left flank and throw a couple of grenades. Tear them to pieces! They do not know the spirit of Yamato!" With these words Amakasu again took up his field-glasses.

The three soldiers crept up to the salt marshes.

"Farewell!" shouted Kondo to his comrades.

"We'll return corporals!" answered Tarada.

"I want to be killed...." muttered Sato between his teeth.

The machine-gunner on the enemy's left flank fired in long bursts. The angry growl of the Maxim moved closer and closer, growing more terrible and persistent. Near the salt marshes Sato stopped in thought. It wasn't going to be quite so simple to advance over open ground covered with nothing but patches of moss. Maybe the Russian soldier had indeed gone mad, but at any rate his machine gun had retained complete control of its senses.

The bullets whistled so low that Sato's head, in spite of himself, was drawn back into his shoulders. "Dzyu-r-r," said one of them, and Sato felt a sharp fillip on the head. He cautiously removed his helmet. There was a small dent on the top, as if someone had struck him with a blunt sabre.

In the meantime Kondo had managed to crawl through the salt marshes and clamber to the middle of the slope.

"Here's yours!" he cried.

The grenade fell short of the top and rolled back. Kondo followed it on his stomach. Then came the ringing sound of the explosion. The machine gun spluttered. The Russian was changing the belt.

"Coming!" cried Sato.

He ran forward and threw the grenade at the canvas hood of the machine-gunner. Bits of cloth and grass flew into the air. The company answered with an exultant roar.

Sato tore the second pin out of the grenade with his teeth. "I want to be killed, I want to be killed," he repeated doggedly, sure that the words were as impregnable as armour. The machine gun stood impotent, silent. But louder and louder rose the voices of the soldiers inspired by his success.

The whole company saw Sato run half way up the slope, wave his hand, and then suddenly fall flat, as if he had slipped. There was a muffled explosion and his body gave a sharp jerk.

Again the machine gun found its tongue. Its muzzle

stuck out through the rocks some twenty metres from the place of the explosion. The soldiers dropped to the ground, burying their round helmets in the grass. They lay silent, awaiting the signal to charge.

Sato bit the earth, the alien, cold, hard earth. Not knowing what had happened, he howled with horror and pain. Finally he grew silent, throwing out his legs and dropping open his mouth filled with frozen earth.

Half a kilometre away Amakasu wet his finger and held up his hand.

"*Sigoku ioy*,"* he said, smiling.

Some murky grey clouds scudded toward the hill from the southeast.

Two machine guns were firing from the stony ridge. The water in the water jackets was boiling and the rifle envelopes were smoking, but no end to the battle was in sight.

The smooth steel helmets advanced up to the salt marshes in a narrowing semicircle. The tin whistles and shrill cries of the commanders urging on the soldiers grew distinct.

Preparing for their thrust across the salt marshes, the Japanese diligently combed the crest of the hill. The earth on which the machine guns were venting their anger had

* Fine.

been dried by the frost, and now it smoked with dust, as though smouldering under an ignition glass.

The rime disappeared. The sky gained depth and colour. The quails, indifferent to the shooting, crept out of the bushes to bask in the sun.

Seven border guards held Mother Hill. They did not stay in one place. The earth smoked under the shower of bullets. It was impossible to lie still. After firing a couple of cartridge clips, they sought a new fold in the earth, a new stone, pit or mound. They fired, and again shifted. The machine guns bit into earth warmed by the men's bodies.

They knew the hill from top to bottom. Three years ago they had lived through the terrors of their first nights on duty here. They had seen the hill covered with snow, glittering with all the splendour of the Ussurian spring, and stripped by the autumn winds. They knew every fold like the palm of their hand.

This undulating, restless earth was more than familiar to the border guards. It was their own.

The high-handed enemy did not worry the troopers. They had been in worse fixes. The seven Siberians fired calculatingly. They did not hurry or block their sights; they held their breath when they pulled the trigger.

The riflemen occupied the valley. The machine guns were set up at the fringes. Zimin defended the right flank, firing in brief bursts. The left flank and the neighbouring Zatilikha Hill were covered by Korzh. Bars lay beside

him, yelping and snapping at the air when wasps flew past his ears.

Ten paces away Squad Commander Garmiz was tearing open packages of bandage. The devil only knows how much hot blood there was in the commander! It had thrust out the tampons, seeped through the bandages and the tunic and lay steaming on the frozen stones. Yet Dubakh's hairy body fought death: it breathed, shook and quivered.

Garmiz was a poor orderly. He spoiled four dressings before he finally bandaged the commander.

Curiously enough, the more blood Dubakh lost the heavier his body became. Finally it grew so heavy that Garmiz realized he would have to fight on alone. He covered his commander with the cape and ran up to Zimin to change the disk.

The raincape hampered Korzh's movements. He threw it off and lay in his shirt. He never noticed the cold. Three soldiers were slowly snaking through the grass to the salt marshes. He shifted his fire against them and got one. The other two took cover.

Garmiz took the raincape, and, dragging it some twenty metres off to one side, fixed the hood on twigs over the grass.

"Let them get some exercise," he said when he returned.

"Where's the chief?" Korzh asked.

"Near the stream."

"Wounded?"

"Don't know."

With a burst as brief as a shout Korzh pinned a group of soldiers near the oaks to the ground. The two Japanese on the left again came to life and ran across the salt marshes.

The belt came to an end.

"They made it!" cried Korzh.

Suddenly the hood of the raincape flew into pieces. Belik rushed to meet the grenade thrower, but Zimin had already managed to send two helmets rolling down the slope.

The Maxim gave a hollow cough as it met the soldiers running towards it. Then there was a pause, interrupted only by staccato rifle shots. Bars' ears shot forward and he sneezed.

"A salute for the Mikado," remarked Korzh.

"Are they retreating?" asked Belik happily.

"No, just taking a rest."

A sharp stone was digging into Korzh's side. He flung it away and pressed still closer to the earth, making himself more comfortable. No power on earth could now dislodge him from his stony glade studded with empty cartridges. He heard the voices of his comrades calling to one another.

Bars sneezed again. From the oak grove came a whiff of something like the sour smell of gunpowder or the smoke of a dung fire.

Korzh looked up from behind his shield and whistled

expressively. The meadow was burning. The dull, almost smokeless flames crept forward in a broken arc. It was very quiet. The hot air quivered over the meadow. The Japanese were silent.

Soon the wind grew stronger. The fires, lit by the soldiers in different parts of the meadow, merged in an unbroken semicircle. Three strips, blue, reddish and grey-black—smoke, fire and burnt grass—crept up to the hill. The sweetish smell of smoke already tickled the nostrils. Some Red Army men jumped up and began to tear out the grass on the ridge. Then these intrepid men moved lower still to set fire to the purple flowers and thus create a defense zone of ashes before the fire ran up the slope. Then the rifles and machine guns on the other side began to talk.

The soldiers ran in the wake of the flames. Now the naked eye could make out their stiff, upright collars, the smooth buttons and the bronze stars on the helmets. Puny and persistent, they were like annoying insects.

Korzh kept them hugging the ground. He sensed the fury and power of his Maxim. As long as the machine gun was chewing the belt, the soldiers were in Korzh's power. He could find them behind the stones, waylay them, catch them on the run. Raging against the tenacious, poisonous vermin, he did not lose his head. He searched them out, forced them back, cut them down.

Meanwhile the flames had crept up to the hill and were lost to sight. The smell of smoke became stronger.

Belik spat on his fingers and wet his eyes. Korzh did the same. "It's smouldering," he thought with relief. "That means that everything is over." Suddenly a flock of pheasants jumped out of the grass, and, flapping their short wings, rushed along the crest. Their hoarse cries sounded frightened. A couple of chipmunks stumbled against Bars, rebounded as if by command, and then ran to the right. Quails followed the chipmunks in a zigzag line. Pushing his mate along with his snout, came a porcupine. Everything alive in this rusty grass—winged, four-legged, quill-or-fur-covered—scrambled down the slope, fleeing the fire.

There was a breath of arid, scorching air. It passed over the hill in sultry waves.

"Tear it up!" cried Korzh.

Belik threw off his cape and crawled forward. He dug his arms up to the pits into the sturdy, dusty carpet of the hill. He broke, trampled and tore up the knotted sorrel, the bramble stalks, the weeds as strong as wire. But what could the fingers of man do when not even scythes could cut the native grass?

The fire was swifter than he and reached toward Korzh from behind. Belik grabbed the cape. Crawling on his knees, he tried to smother the yellow tongues. Bars rushed up from behind, pulling at the machine-gunners' shirts and calling the men to leave.

The men did not heed him. It was impossible to leave, for with its ponderous body Mother Hill shielded two

hollows. He who lost the crest yielded a point of defence.

Four riflemen fired from the hill. They fired sparingly.

The wind blew the fire in Korzh's face. He drew his head deep down into his shoulders. The tongues slipped under the Maxim, and the paint on the jacket blistered.

The machine-gunner called to Belik, but instead of the cook a strange, guttural voice answered:

"Hey, Russian!" cried the guttural voice. "Quit your pointless shooting!"

Korzh wanted to cry out in answer but was afraid his voice would break.

"Nev—er-r-r!" replied the Maxim to the guttural voice.

"Hey, brother! Quit shooting!"

"Nev—er-r-r!" answered the Maxim.

There was a string of curses. Infuriated by their failure, pressed to the ground by the machine gun, the soldiers swore at the half-dead Red Army man.

They yelled:

"Hey, you roasted carrion!"

They yelled:

"You'll choke on your own guts!"

They yelled:

"You dog, you won't get away!"

The machine-gunner heard nothing. To him it seemed

that his blood was on fire and not the grass, that only his eyes and fingers were alive in his body. His eyes sought the owner of the guttural voice, his fingers pressed the release.

At last the machine gun choked and stopped. The soldiers rushed up to the ridge.

"Stop! Quit shooting!" shouted Amakasu.

"Nev—er-r-r!" answered the Maxim and Korzh.

That was the last breath of both.

Chapter Thirteen

"They were trapped," said Dubakh, reining in his horse. "We accepted the frontal attack, and meanwhile the cavalry troop.... Do you see that little gully?"

The horsemen turned. The hills were almost alike, with the same shaggy slopes speckled with bright bunches of gillyflowers. The dells were also alike, blue and spotted with oak and hazel.

It was noontime, a drowzy and contented hour. The birds were silent. The stillness was broken only by bees, yellow with pollen, that droned past the heads of the riders.

"I can't make it out," admitted Nikita Mikhailovich.

"It's not important—the gully has no name. But your son will have to remember: the cavalry galloped out of it and crushed the left flank of the Japanese. They picked up two limbersful of ammunition alone."

"They say that regulations prohibit them from retreating."

Dubakh smiled—his teeth had a youthful sparkle under his corn-coloured moustache. Tiny lines of mirth radiated even from under the black patch covering one eye.

"Well, you see, they're not sticklers for form," he said with a grin. "Lieutenant, what's his name ... Amakasu, even he, I think, could give the Znamensky brothers* a handicap of 100 points."

"Did he get away?"

"No, he changed his mind. Or, rather, Nugis talked him over. Have you seen him? A most persuasive sort of a fellow."

"The curious thing is," remarked Dubakh, leading his horse into the stream, "that when they began to tend the wounded it appeared that most of the Samurai guards were tipsy. The Manchurians were in an even more surprising state: dilated pupils, drowziness, dulled reactions. The doctors say it was the effect of opium."

"And what happened to the Japanese?" asked Pavel.

"We returned them. Twenty-three in coffins and sixteen alive. We want nothing that isn't ours."

"Was there a ceremony?"

"How else? ... Their major even made a speech: he started speaking Japanese and ended in Russian. "I was most overjoyed by the heroism of the Russian soldier."

* Georgi and Serafim Znamensky held the U.S.S.R. middle-distance track record between 1934 and 1940.

He counted the corpses, thought a while and then added: "A great thanks!" Captain Dyatlov answered in Japanese: "You are quite welcome," he said, "our quality remains always our own."

They rode up to the borderpost. It was quiet there. Two Red Army men were sodding a star-shaped flowerbed. Near them lay seedlings wrapped in damp cloths. On the steps of the barracks sat a blond, good-natured looking private. He was sharpening his sword ploughman fashion and singing some endless song in a thin falsetto.

Beyond the stream, at the riding school, horses were neighing and short commands could be heard.

As always the barracks lived several days in one. For some the day was at its height, for others it had not yet begun. In the sleeping quarters, on pillows bathed in sunlight, lay the close-cropped heads of the men who had returned from the taiga at dawn.

The commander went up to the window and pulled down the blinds. The orderly ran in.

"You should have seen to that," grumbled Dubakh.

They tiptoed into the next room. Here Belik and Ilka were sitting at the table. The cook was pasting newspaper clippings about Korzh into the "Book of Heroes." Ilka drew frames for them with a coloured pencil.

In his pictures Korzh was better looking and more serious.

Ilka looked Pavel over and asked primly:

"Is your name really Korzh? Are you strong?"

Pavel flexed his arm and showed her his biceps.

"O-ho! And can you do tricks on the horizontal bar? What can you do? If you like I'll show you how to feed a cartridge belt."

"Now it's begun!" laughed Dubakh.

Frowning, Ilka walked around Pavel, sizing him up.

"No military bearing," she remarked with a worried look. "But never mind. Only please don't fall asleep on duty."

"Do you want to see our library?" asked Dubakh. He opened the bookcase and took out a tremendous heap of envelopes.

All the shelves were packed with letters. There were envelopes made from newspapers, sealed packages of parchment, postcards dropped at small railway stations, large sheets with hundreds of signatures. There were telegrams and school notebooks, verses and drawings.

Nikita Mikhailovich hesitantly unfolded one of the sheets. It was a letter from a stoker in Murmansk.

"Excuse me for troubling you," wrote the stoker. "You are on duty, while I am free now, and here I am imposing my sympathy. Our sorrow is common, and our pride also. I am sending you a poem on the death of Comrade Korzh (notebook one). The rest I will finish tomorrow because I go on duty at six. Comrade Commander, please read it at a general meeting as the expression of the sentiments of a Soviet seaman."

"It was impossible to read it all," said Belik. "When he comes to the Japanese he seems to fall into prose."

Nikita Mikhailovich did not answer. He fumbled absently in his jacket, shifting first the eyeglass case from pocket to pocket, then the machine-gun cartridge picked up that morning on the hill. His hands trembled. Neither the trip to the battlefield nor the time spent on detail the day before with his son's comrades had stirred the old man as much as this bookcase filled with letters.

He hastily put on his glasses, sat down at the table, and in a loud, quavering tenor began to read the letters addressed to the post. Textile workers from Moscow, parachutists from Rostov, bakers from Barabinsk, submarine men, geologists, railway conductors, artists, truck drivers from Ashkhabad—letters from them all. They wrote from towns of which o'd Korzh had never even heard.

The letters were simple and sincere, letters from people who had never seen Andrei and did not know him, but who wanted to be like him.

"Dear Comrades of the Border Guards," read Nikita Mikhailovich. "We can't come now because, first of all, there are examinations to be passed in geography and Russian. And secondly, Alexei Eduardovich says that it would be simply disorganization to go right away. Please enlist us now as machine-gunners. We shall be drafted in 1943 and will immediately come to replace Comrade Korzh. For the time being we send our Young Pioneer greetings and our four best targets."

"I should copy this," said Nikita Mikhailovich. But there were so many letters that he sighed and continued to read.

"... We suggest that the plinth of the monument be made of labradorite and the figure itself be done by the Kaslinsky masters.* May the Red Army man in bronze stand forever on the hill where he gave up his life for his motherland."

"... Is it true that he died from loss of blood? Wasn't it really possible to make a blood transfusion for such a man or to get an airplane from the city?"

"... We, truck drivers of the Sixth Motor Station, promise to train four snipers from among our workers."

Lovingly smoothed out by Belik's hands lay telegrams which had flown from all parts of the country.

"... Am physically fit. Have good recommendations. Enroll me in borderpost."

"... Telegraph Kaluga, P.O. Box 16. Do you accept girl volunteers. Have GTO Button.** High school graduate."

"... Troupe will arrive early in May. Rehearsing 'Platon Krechet,' 'Slava.' Inform whether possible to have some properties delivered by pack animals."

"... Wire Moscow express Trekhgornaya Textile Mill. Has Comrade Korzh any children. Will adopt."

* Well-known Urals craftsmen.
** Ready for Labour and Defence.

The men had long ago returned from the riding school. The commander, making his excuses, had left, and Belik had taken Pavel along with him. The night patrols were already preparing to leave the barracks, but Nikita Mikhailovich still sat reading aloud the touching letters from strangers.

Never had he felt that the world was so big, that so many thousands of people sincerely mourned Andrei's death. He remembered the rain-washed road to Mukden, the regimental headquarters, the black-bordered letters overflowing the cartridge crate, the sour, effeminate face of the clerk who filled in the names of the dead on the blanks. Would his wife have received such an envelope if he, Nikita Korzh, had been blown up by a Japanese grenade?

Before him lay a heap of letters—tender, fatherly letters. His mischievous, keen-eyed Andrei was dear not only to him but to everyone.

Nikita Mikhailovich took off his glasses and sighed, comforted. For the first time since he had received that fateful telegram he felt no pain.

1937



THE END OF THE *SAGO-MARU*

I'LL tell you this story on one condition only: look up our machinist Sachkov in Leningrad. He'll be easy to find even without asking the address bureau.

He lives in house No. 6 at Yelagin Bridge. You need only remember his description and you'll recognize him, even if he hasn't had a shave. He's 172 centimetres tall—about a head shorter than I am—with ordinary eyes and hair. His chest is rather hairy; and in good old navy fashion a blue anchor is tattooed on his shoulder. He plays the first domra in the orchestra and is always at left half on the football field.

If you find Sachkov tell him that the *Sago-Maru* is no longer visible, even at ebb tide. Last year the stern still stuck out of the water, but when we cruised past Cape Burun a month ago all we could see on that neck of land

were some seagulls. That's what always happens in these regions: what the sea doesn't swallow, the sand does.

In 1934 Sachkov and I served on the coast guard cutter *Smyeli.* Sachkov was the machinist and I the helmsman. She was a trim little boat, short, with sides that bulged just like a walnut, and painted from top to waterline a light grey, as befits a coast guard ship. It was fun to watch (naturally, from the shore) the sea playing leapfrog with the *Smyeli* as she lurched along, spitting and shaking off the onrushing waves. We made the rounds of the Kamchatka coast in her many a time, and we knew every rock between Olyutorka and Lopatka.

To tell the truth, the *Smyeli* was on her last legs in our detachment. She was a steady enough craft and seaworthy in any weather, but much too leisurely for these qualities to be put to use in an encounter with an enemy.

Where the success of an operation depended only on speed, it was hard to bank on the *Smyeli.* That's what everyone thought—except Sachkov. It's only natural. Down in the engine room you can never see what's going on up above. Besides, Sachkov was as stubborn and as touchy as they come. It needed only a mention at the dinner table that the *Sobol* or the *Kizhuch* was faster than the *Smyeli* for our mechanic to put down his spoon dejectedly.

"You first learn to tell the difference between a primus

stove and a diesel," he would advise the offender, "and then get into the *Sobol* and try to overtake me."

He would not be contradicted, and everything that was said against the ancient engine he took as a personal insult. "There is no cutter on the seas but the *Smyeli*, and Sachkov is her mechanic," the wits used to say about us.

This skinny, sharp-nosed lad had still another peculiarity: he loved mathematics. To calculate how soon a train would overtake a snail, or how many minutes it would take to fill a bottomless barrel, was a mere trifle to him.

Our machinist extracted square roots faster than the company surgeon could pull teeth. That's hard to believe, of course, but I myself have seen Sachkov, after getting shore leave, go to the city park, lie down on the grass and begin to crack mathematical problems as if they were nuts. While at it he kept smiling and smacking his lips.

One day Sachkov even brought down into the orlop and hung up beside the portrait of the People's Commissar some sort of Greek with blank eyes and with a beard as curly as lambskin. When I pointed out that it was improper to hang them side by side, he waved his hand and said:

"Now don't play the fool, Oleshchuk. Do you mean to say you've never seen a picture of Pythagoras?"

At that time we still had no idea that Sachkov was preparing to enter university, and we greatly wondered at his oddities.

Sachkov's progress in mathematics naturally had no

influence whatever on the cutter's performance. If we managed to capture some Japanese pirate schooner gorged with fish like a cod, it had nothing to do with the machinist's ability to solve equations. Every cruise increasingly brought home to us the slowness of our cutter.

That year we were patrolling the three-mile zone off the western coast, which was a favourite haunt of Japanese pirate fishermen. The sea there is murky and far from inviting, but there are no more teeming waters in all the world.

Here you could find striped whales, crabs a metre long, sperm whales with fish tails and the mouth of a hippopotamus, plaice as big as a good-sized wheel, fat herrings that melt in the sun, speckled mintai, big-bellied cod, smelts that have the odour of pickles, sea urchins, devilfish, cuttlefish, octopuses, sea lions roaring on the rocks at Cape Shipunsky, sea otters, seals: in a word, everything that breathes, dives, swims or crawls in salt water.

I have not yet said anything about the family of red fish—and the Pacific salmon deserves special mention. This fish deposits eggs only once in its lifetime and unfailingly in the river where its forebears spawned. Every year, beginning with the middle of July, the Pacific salmon flock to fresh water. If their river has grown shallow, they will crawl; if the way is blocked by fallen trees or rocks, they will jump over them.

At this time of the year all Kamchatka is on its feet. Everyone who can distinguish plaice from salmon pulls

on his rubber boots and wades out to meet the Pacific salmon.

Seals swim up to the mouths of the rivers; gaunt bears come out to the streams; cart dogs, sensing the smell of fresh *yukola*,* bay and tear at their chains.

Fires burn all night long on shore and at sea. The fish tear through the nets and overturn *kungasi*.** They churn up the rivers. Fishermen, salters and cutters go around all plastered up with scales, tired and drenched, but happy.

The pirates also revive. The Japanese fishermen are like the cod: the bigger the fish, the wider their jaws drop open. I am not a prophet, but I know for certain that some day a fish tail will get stranded in their throats.

The "Iron Chinamen"*** in the canneries chew Pacific salmon the whole day round; Japanese seasonal workers constantly ply the leased fishing areas, and rapscallions of skippers let down nets with additional sections. But even that doesn't satisfy them. The gentlemen from Hokkaido send a mosquito fleet to Kamchatka armed with tackle and nets. Clumsy but seaworthy *kavasaki*, roomy seiners, fast schooners, ancient tubs with carved bowsprits —hundreds of avaricious beasts of prey flock here like flies to a kitchen. The tiniest craft come from the Kuril Islands. They come without compasses and without maps but with

* Sun-dried fish.
** Large, flat-bottomed rowboats.
*** Automatic machines for cutting and disemboweling fish.

sacks of low-grade rice and barrels of stale radish. They dash against the reefs and they pay fines, yet they continue to try and steal what they can.

Their methods are cowardly and brazen. If a coast guard boat is anywhere in the vicinity the pirates keep well beyond the three-mile zone; here they wait, mend their nets, knit sweaters or stroll along the deck as though they love to watch the Kamchatka hills.

But as soon as we turn away, this horde rushes to the shore and with a skill that bars comparison grabs up fish by the gills.

We knew many of the pirates quite well. Three miles off, any member of our crew could recognize *kavasaki* NG-43 or the two-motor cutter *Hayai* which always had a whole flotilla of smaller boats in tow. The schooner *Sago-Maru* was one that particularly got under our skin. She was a craft of 70 tons, with a sturdy hull and good lines. In fresh weather she easily made ten miles, just enough to reach the safety zone in time.

Most likely the *Sago-Maru* had a station somewhere in the vicinity, on the island of Shimushu, because she appeared with amazing regularity near Cape Burun, where a Japanese cannery was located.

Cape Burun and a shoal built up by river silt form a shallow bay that is always full of fish. It is rather difficult to say just what attracts the fish to these turbid waters, but in July the bay looks like a vat for salting herring.

The fish swim in over the shoal at high tide and at

low tide are left trapped. In search for an exit they rush through a narrow channel along Cape Burun. That is where they trip up against the nets stealthily lowered by the Japanese pirates.

The fishermen following in the wake of the cod and the salmon in this bay take just as great a risk as the fish: a schooner drawing seven feet can get out only if she keeps in the channel running parallel to Cape Burun. However, this circumstance didn't worry our friends.

The skipper of the *Sago-Maru* possessed a seventh sense. The *Smyeli* had only to appear some five miles away from the cannery for the schooner to pull up her nets and dash for the safety zone.

That year the cutter was under the command of Koloskov. He came from Kerch fishermen stock, had sound judgment, and was rather shrewd; he had a fat, stubborn neck and huge red hands which stuck way out of any monkey jacket.

Koloskov hunted the *Sago-Maru* with calculated persistence and was never disconcerted by the outcome of his chase.

"They can't get beyond the sea anyhow," he would console himself as he turned the cutter back. "The cod will be hooked yet."

But a note of vexation could be sensed in his joke. It is not easy for a coast guard to watch Soviet waters being plundered.

We spent all of May off the eastern coast of Kamchatka, where we detained a schooner belonging to the firm of Nichiro and two *kungasi* full of herring. In June we were transferred from the Pacific Ocean to the Sea of Okhotsk.

The *Sago-Maru* continued to plunder the coastal waters. Sometimes we managed to come within less than three miles of the schooner, but she nonetheless slipped away, marking her sunken nets with little buoys or mats. Once we pulled out a cod seine about half a kilometre long. Another time we raised a sunken net which contained about fifty tons of gasping fish.

Our prizes looked very modest, to say the least, when compared to the growing impudence of the *Sago-Maru*. She began to let us come so close that we could make out the faces of the crew. At such times the skipper would step to the stern and hold out a rope to us.

Once we fired a warning shot in the air. It made the men on the schooner scurry about some and they even cut down their speed, but soon the engine throbbed with redoubled energy.

The skipper had evidently convinced the machinist that the coast guards would not fire at an unarmed boat.

We could not get over the skipper's canine sense of smell until we discovered the connection between the *Sago-Maru* and the Japanese cannery.

Hidden as we were from sight by the cape, the pirates couldn't even see the tips of our masts from the bay, but

there was an excellent view of both the bay and the sea from the cannery.

Whenever we appeared in their field of vision a striped cone was hoisted up on the signal tower near the cannery office. This innocent signal supposedly showed the direction of the wind, but as soon as it appeared, our friend flew out from behind the cape like an arrow.

We chased the *Sago-Maru* all throughout June; we lay in wait for her behind Bird Rock, we tried to steal up on her in a fog, but never with any success. By the time we reached the spot where she had been fishing, the schooner was already beyond the three-mile limit.

In July, just before the schools of Pacific salmon were expected, our cutter's engine was overhauled. That was a dull time. The *Smyeli* stood perched on rollers, screwless and as hollow as an empty barrel, while we scraped the barnacles off her bottom.

Only Sachkov was pleased. He would come to the orlop deck late at night, stained with candle snuff and oil, would wash up, trying to be as quiet as possible, and then disappear again into the workshop at dawn.

After assembling the engine he tested it for a long time on the stand, listening, and finally announced:

"Just like velvet—purrs like a cat.... Moves on tiptoe."

Someone remarked sensibly:

"Let the cat move on tiptoe. The important thing is how it will run."

"Like a greyhound! With an engine like that we could even set out for the North Pole."

...We left the cove at night. The sea was so calm that it looked frozen. The air was chilly, the engine breathed deeply, and we flew along as though on ice.

Just as soon as the lighthouse slipped from view Sachkov called me into the engine room.

Our machinist was shining from head to toe like a polished copper coin. He had shaved, put on a fresh jersey and a clean crown on his cap, and so doused himself with eau de Cologne that my eyes smarted.

With a fancy gesture Sachkov poured some water into a cup and ceremoniously set it on the engine jacket.

"Any worse than a Packard?" he asked ecstatically.

The water in the cup did not ripple. According to the machinist, this was a sign of faultless tuning of the engine and the shaft. I praised the engine. Sachkov immediately beamed at me.

"I think we can get the towline ready," he said, looking the engine over like a mother hen. "Now don't forget to yell when we get near the *Sago-Maru.* I want to get a look at her machinist's face."

"But if...."

"Then I'll add another five revolutions," he said earnestly.

At dawn we sighted the squat wooden lighthouse on Cape Lopatka known to every sailor in the Far East.

This lighthouse stands at the very tip of Kamchatka.

between the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Okhotsk, and on foggy days it warns passing ships with its bell.

This time the lighthouse was silent. The horizon was clear. A gentle land breeze barely rippled the sea.

Grampuses revelled in the morning quiet, leaping out of the water in a broad arc and leaving a gleaming trail behind as they dived back again. Once in a while a frightened puffin would fly up right from under the nose of the *Smyeli,* working its wings like scissors.

We hugged the coast as we approached Cape Burun, but they saw us anyway. A Japanese rushed over to the tower and raised the signal—a cone.

The *Sago-Maru* did not appear.

We doubled the cape at full speed and almost collided with a Japanese *kungasi* heading for the cannery.

Some half-naked huskies in blue jackets and gaudy kerchiefs jumped up and raised a hullabaloo.

The *Sago-Maru* was no more than three cable lengths off. Even without field-glasses we could see a heap of fish on her deck and some netting coiled around a capstan. The windlass must have been out of order because four sailors were raising the anchor by hand, constantly turning to look at us.

Two small *isabune** heaped with fish right up to the rowlocks were hurrying toward the *Sago-Maru.* The bosun scurried about the deck yelling at the oarsmen. But they

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* A Japanese flat-bottomed boat.

needed no urging: emitting hoarse, breathless cries, they lay to as one man and the oars dipped and tore through the water.

We were three on the deck of the *Smyeli*; Koloskov at the helm, near him the recruit Kositsyn, a conscientious Chuvash lad, and I at the bow, ready to throw the rope.

The *Smyeli* was making for the schooner at full speed. We were only two cable lengths apart now, but the Japanese, weaving like mechanical dolls, continued to pull up the anchor chain.

We wondered what those pirates were counting on: the *isabune* with the fishermen were only just coming up and our cutter blocked the way to the sea.

"Comrade Kositsyn," said Koloskov almost gaily, "take the fenders. See, our guests are not even budging.... They're overgorged."

Just then an exultant cry burst from the bosun. The anchor came up clear. At the same time the *isabune* with the fishermen drew up.

It was already too late to try to raise the boats on the tackle. We saw the fishermen jump up onto the schooner. Then the *Sago-Maru*, turning her stern to us, headed directly for the shoal separating the bay from the river.

At any other time this would have been suicidal, but now it was high tide and several feet of water covered the shoal—we still did not know exactly how many.

Koloskov and I glanced at each other, as if by command.

"How much do they draw?" he asked.

"Six.... No more than seven."

"I think so too."

With these words Koloskov took a half turn to cut off the schooner right at the shallow. We had a reserve of two to three feet more water under our keel than the *Sago-Maru.*

Where the sea and river meet, we rolled and were turned broadside to the current.

For a few seconds the *Smyeli* would not obey the wheel. Then she got the better of the centre drag and set off quickly in pursuit of the schooner.

The engine on the *Sago-Maru* was not working properly. It sneezed, coughed, and spit pitch-black rings of smoke into the sky. We were only fifteen metres from the schooner; we saw the perplexed faces of the crew and could even count the fish piled up on deck.

The *Sago-Maru* was to our portside. Kositsyn brought the fenders to port. I cried "Stop!" to the Japanese and threw the rope onto the schooner's deck. Not a man of the crew budged, and the rope slipped into the water.

The skipper, standing on the stern facing us, puffed at his copper pipe and kept spitting into the water as if we were a playful dolphin and not a coast guard cutter.

Kositsyn had never seen such a display of arrogance. Losing his temper, he shook his fist at the skipper and

shouted some words which are understood in all languages. For this he was immediately reprimanded.

"That won't help us," said Koloskov. "If you can't control yourself, look the other way.... That's right."

Then he turned to the speaking tube and whispered:

"Give her all you can!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" answered Sachkov.

For a while it seemed to us that the *Sago-Maru* and the *Smyeli* were standing still, and then the gap between them widened a bit. Slowly, with great effort, the schooner was outstripping the cutter.

"Two more revolutions—more...." whispered Koloskov, trying not to look at the *Sago-Maru*.

"Two more it is," came the echo from below.

Just a bit more was needed. Perhaps only a few more revolutions of the screw. But now we were out of the lee of the cape. An oncoming wave immediately cut down our speed.

In twenty minutes the schooner had crossed the three-mile limit. The skipper, waving his hand to us, threw a large glass float covered with netting into the water.

"She slipped out!" said Koloskov as we passed the float without stopping.

The weather turned bad. The wind blew hard against the deck-cabin, and the *Smyeli* began to dip, scooping up water. By making a half turn to port at once we could have come under the lee of the coast. Yet we continued

our chase, for Koloskov was the stubborn kind and always banked on success.

The *Smyeli* pitched heavily. Her hull groaned under the blows. The water imprisoned on deck splashed about with a hiss. Now and again, when the stern was tossed up, we could hear the exposed screw tearing at the air.

Finally a wave broke the glass in the hatch and water began to make its way into the engine room. We were tired and wet. The cook tried to prepare dinner but the pots flew out of their niches and the primus stove plunked right into the soup.

It gave one the blues to look at Kositsyn. His face as green as winter wheat, he had dug all his ten fingers into a coil of hemp rigging and closed his eyes so as not to see the water.

I told Kositsyn to go to the orlop and lie down. He shouted "Aye, aye, sir!" and clung still closer to the deck.

"Leave him alone," said Koloskov in a loud voice. "I know Volga men. They don't even get wet in water."

This acted on Kositsyn like a glass of strong, hot coffee. He got up and even tried to walk across the deck.

Soon the island of Shimushu came into sight—a snowy blue on the shaded side and blood-red in the sun. The low hull of the schooner disappeared among the whitecaps, and we turned back.

On our way back to Cape Burun the lieutenant had us pick up the float. Between the glass and the netting lay

a note wrapped in oilcloth. It was a bit wet, but the words, printed in Russian, were still legible.

"Good day! Want you one can oil? Probly use much oil today."

Koloskov smoothed the paper carefully and put it in his monkey jacket.

"Why," he said with a grin, "maybe so. We'll take it—together with the schooner."

On the following day I saw Sachkov at his books. He was sitting in the cabin, radiant, sketching something in his notebook. He was even smacking his lips in evident pleasure, probably at the unravelling of one of his usual problems with ten unknown quantities.

His absurd equanimity got under my skin. He looked as if he had just towed in the *Sago-Maru*. And here our monkey jackets were still wet after our unsuccessful chase.

I sat down at the table opposite Sachkov and deliberately raising my voice asked:

"Why didn't you come up on deck? Didn't you want to get a look at the Japanese machinist?"

His face clouded over, but he said nothing.

"All right, let's forget it. That isn't what I came for. There's an interesting problem.... True, it's so involved that the devil himself...."

"What is it?" asked Sachkov eagerly.

"Here then, take it down. A pirate schooner has caught in our waters 100.05 centners of fish. Her speed is X multiplied by her impudence. Now.... At two o'clock

sharp the cutter *Smyeli*, with Sachkov its machinist, sights the schooner. The distance between them is two miles. The problem is...."

"That's just what I was thinking about," answered Sachkov quickly. "Here's the answer."

He showed me a drawing of the river, the bay and Cape Burun, with a triangle traced in heavy black ink.

"What's that?"

"The hypotenuse of a right triangle is shorter than the sum of the two other sides," answered Sachkov mysteriously. "Do you know that?"

I wasn't very strong in geometry at the time.

"Well," I remarked cautiously, "that all depends...."

He looked up at me in surprise and continued:

"The hypotenuse here is the river. The channel going around the shoal makes up the two sides. If you go up the river at night and wait there until low tide.... You see?"

"I think so... All but the sides."

"Not sighting us at sea, the *Sago-Maru* will enter the bay and begin to drop her nets. Then we rush out of the river. Along the hypotenuse, like this...."

"Then she'll get away just like yesterday."

"But I said we'd wait for low tide. Then she can go only through the channel parallel to Cape Burun. She'll speed in that direction. But the hypotenuse is shorter than the sum of the two other sides. We'll be waiting for the schooner at the exit. Clear?"

I tried to argue, but the odds were against me in this debate. There were two against me: Euclid and Sachkov. Under the weight of their arguments I had to agree that the hypotenuse was the shortest road to victory.

Koloskov, to whom we immediately showed the drawing, heard us out in silence.

"We'll see what we'll see," he said indefinitely.

We were rather disappointed when the commander left, but an hour later we met Koloskov with an oilcloth-covered notebook under his arm. He was returning from headquarters. Behind him came two sailors carrying for some reason or other a field telephone and a reel of wire.

"There'll be no shore leaves today," Koloskov warned us as he passed.

That evening, without having rested up after the cruise, we again left our cove.

This time we met the *Sago-Maru* just outside the bay. She had already managed to collect her seines and was taking out to sea, almost scooping up water with her sides. Two fishermen, standing at the stern hatch up to their knees in fish, were sorting out the catch, skilfully hooking up the plaice, the bloated cod and the speckled mintai.

The bow hatch was already loaded. The bosun, wearing a kerchief and a yellow sou'-wester, was dousing the deck, on which the scales were still gleaming, from the fire-pump. When they caught sight of us they began to jeer and thumb their noses. We approached so close that we

got a whiff of the putrid fish odour of which the boat reeked from mast to keel.

Then the same thing was repeated. Kositsyn brought over the fenders. I threw out the rope, this time with studied clumsiness. The schooner tore away from us and headed for the open sea.

Koloskov played his part well. He pretended to be vexed, slapped his thighs, threw out his arms in dismay and ran fussily around the boat, making everyone on the schooner roar with laughter. Finally, with a gesture of despair, the lieutenant went down into the orlop, where the entire crew was assembled.

"Splendid acting!" he laughed, and felt his pocket where the skipper's note lay.

Usually after a chase we returned to our base or continued our cruise as per orders. This time Koloskov steered the cutter straight for Cape Burun.

Now he was content. He chaffed the machinist and kept glancing at his watch.

It was so dark that we could no longer distinguish the coastline. We saw only the gleaming whitecaps, which scattered into spray and were borne off by the wind. The darkness made Koloskov even happier.

"It will soon be high tide," he said when the cannery lights appeared over the water to starboard. "I should like to know when their third shift goes out."

"They'll be asleep in an hour," said Sachkov, climbing out of the hatch. "That's easy enough to calculate."

"Again the hypotenuse?"

"No, simple arithmetic."

"Well, then, see here," said Koloskov solemnly. "Here is another problem to solve—extract the entire forty-five horsepower out of your engine, multiply it by two, and then add seven more revolutions. We must enter the river before the tide goes out."

With these words he extinguished the navigation lights and laughed contentedly.

The cannery was asleep as we idled up to Cape Burun. The barracks of the Japanese workers, roofed with tar paper and as narrow as coffins, were dark. Wet mats hung on poles in the yard. Heaps of red fish covered with canvas loomed in the dark. Someone was moving with a lantern through the shop, inspecting the salting pits.

Our fishing settlements are full of bustle even at midnight. There is always a light somewhere, and singing. Some reckless *kuriban** is always about with a gang of girl salters. The Japanese cannery looked as deserted as in late autumn when the last *kungasi* with fishermen have taken off from Cape Burun.

Only men worked here: fishermen from Karafuta and Hokkaido. They had six hours of rest a day, and every minute of their brief sleep was precious. It was hard to imagine that the barracks contained three tiers holding 1,500 men, everything was so still. Only the throbbing of the refrigerator engine disturbed the silence of the night.

* The man who checks in the boats.

It was high tide. The river, swollen by the tidal waters, was on a level with the low shores. Willows dipped their leaves into the dark waters. Far out to sea stretched a broad strip of foam. We entered this strip and fought our way against the powerful current toward the mouth of the river.

To muffle the engine we closed the portholes and the engine hatches.

No one on deck felt like talking. We were drawing near the sand bars at the mouth of the swift river. Koloskov turned the wheel over to me and went to the bow to direct the cutter from there.

Anyone who has ever negotiated a sand bar knows how dangerous they are, even for experienced sailors. As the river cuts through the surf here it forms several long, high billows. In the space between them you can almost see bottom. The billows themselves rise several metres high. If you're not wide awake or miscalculate the path of the cutter, the river will turn her broadside to the current and drop a couple of tons of cold water mixed with sand and stones on your head.

Sometimes a boat noses right into the sand, turns over and buries those who have managed to retain their hold on the deck. It doesn't make much difference to the crew whether they hold on or not, for those who jump for safety into the shoal can relate their adventures only to deep-sea divers anyway.

I always get these sober thoughts when branches turn

somersaults on either side of the cutter and whirlpools rumble like an empty stomach.

The *Smyeli* was in particular danger because we were moving at night, getting our bearings only by the foam on the river. Standing at the bow, Koloskov raised now his right hand, then his left, signalling like stevedores do to winchmen on ships.

Slowly the *Smyeli* crawled up to the danger spot, grazed against the sand bank and found herself suddenly caught between two billows.

Kositsyn gauged the water with his rod and croaked in a preoccupied manner:

"O-over. . . ."

But it was clear enough even without the gauging rod that the *Smyeli* was not grounded. A powerful middle current pressed against the cutter so heavily that I had the greatest difficulty in turning the wheel.

The *Smyeli* hung between two fat bulges. Her bow rested on a low, glassy wave. The water ran along the deck without, incidentally, flowing over the hatch guards, while a whole mountain of water came along in tow at the stern, carrying a heavy crest about to break and drop down on us.

The *Smyeli's* little old hull groaned and vibrated. The chain in the anchor locker clattered, the railings trembled. the glass and the doors quivered, and the dish cupboard shook as with the ague. It was as if a strong hand had seized the cutter and pinned her down.

The incoming tide helped us, but even with the engine working at full speed we could not climb the wave. The *Smyeli's* bow cut some two feet into it but nothing we could do would make her budge an inch farther. Everything stood petrified around us: the shore, the breakers, time, the cast-iron wave behind the stern....

One of the hatches over the engine room was open. I saw Sachkov in his jersey and linen trousers regaling the machine out of his long-nosed lubricator. Exhausted by its twenty-four hour trip, it creaked, sneezed and spit hot water and smoke. Crouching beside the engine, Sachkov was wiping its greasy sides with a rag and talking to it as if he were coaxing a wayward dog.

"Now then, just once more," he mumbled, his eyes tearing from the smoke. "You funny thing, you darling, you green devil, pussykins, just half a revolution.... Honest.... Now, then, be patient.... Just this once more...."

He urged it on patiently and gently, tightened the cocks, regulated the mixture, and, alarmed, put his ear to the hot jacket of the engine.

"Hup-chi—hupchi—no-thing do-ing—thing do-ing!" came the answer from the engine.

In the meantime Koloskov up at the prow began to show signs of impatience. He glanced from the shore to the shoal, pulled up the collar of his monkey jacket, and finally came up to the tube to quietly remind Sachkov:

"Comrade Sachkov, what about our agreement?"

"The very most it is!"

"Can't see it. We're frozen to the spot. Squeeze out the most. . . ."

"Aye, aye, sir, squeeze out the most it is!" answered Sachkov, and he resumed his whispered conversation with the engine.

I have heard men talking to their horses and personally knew a junior officer who had made up a "dog alphabet," but this was the first time I heard a conversation between a sober man and an engine.

Evidently they could come to no agreement, for Sachkov straightened up and rewarded his friend with a hard slap.

"You won't?" he asked, offended. "Well then, hold on and the devil take you!"

He rose and put his hand on the throttle. The knock became a scrunch. The machine grunted just as if it were climbing uphill.

"We're moving. Just a little more. . . . We're going," hissed Koloskov from the bow.

The cutter shot forward, cut and trampled down a wave, and, spitting hot water, passed into the calm river.

We had to travel seven more kilometres upstream before we found a suitable anchorage. The river made a sharp turn here, as if it had resolved to double back. Only a ridge of low hills covered with honeysuckle separated us from the sea. Again we could hear the muffled thunder of the surf.

Kositsyn jumped ashore to tie us fast, but a shaggy dog with a rope around its neck rose from the bushes. At its heels came others. We discovered that we had landed at a dog camp. Kamchatka fishermen and hunters always tie up their dogs for the summer near a river. They visit them once a day, give each dog two fish from a pit filled with pickled fish, and leave them.

The dog howled with fright. His mates supported him. A whole hundred gaunt, moulting dogs began to complain to us of the bad food, the rain, the mosquitoes and other canine miseries.

We hastily left our noisy neighbours and half an hour later moored in a narrow channel overgrown on both sides with spurge. We were to wait here until the *Sago-Maru* sailed into Cape Burun.

I was planning to dry my monkey jacket and take a nap for about three hundred minutes but Koloskov came up to me and asked in a confident voice:

"You don't, of course, want to sleep, do you, Comrade Oleshchuk?"

"Well, naturally—of course not," said I, blinking. "After a cruise one always suffers from insomnia."

Koloskov laughed. He himself was rather shaky.

"That's what I thought."

He continued, immediately changing the tone of the conversation:

"Take the apparatus and the telephone reel and go with the bosun across the hills to Cape Burun. Camouflage

yourselves and keep a lookout. Report every half hour. At four you will be relieved."

...The night was cold and starry. The howling of the dogs followed us as we made our way through a cedar grove, unwinding the reel.

An hour later we lay shivering in the wet grass and listened to the whispered bass of the commander coming through the receiver.

There was little news. Koloskov complained of the mosquitoes, I of the cold. Then we heard the roar of the primus stove, and Koloskov announced that coffee was being made for us.

The sea was fresh. We saw Japanese fishermen pulling up their *kungasi* farther from the shore. Not a single schooner sailed past the bay that night.

The next day the storm grew worse. We found ourselves bottled up in the stream. But that was no great misfortune, for in such weather the pirates sat at home. However, Koloskov was discouraged and seemed to imagine that Japanese had landed on the shore and were ransacking the sea otter rookery.

Protected from the sea by the hills, we almost felt no wind at all. Everyone was able to dry his clothes and take a rest. Sachkov set his engine going and heated the electric iron. Even Kositsyn's spirits revived. He again began to smile and even assured me that on the Volga, near Kazan, the storms were worse.

I asked Koloskov for permission to go out, and went

upstream to watch the Pacific salmon spawning. It was July, and the fish were swarming in from the sea to the fresh water they had left two years before.

They say that if you take a cat to the other end of town in a sack he'll always find his way home. But the salmon have a much better memory. No matter where the Pacific salmon lives, whether near Africa or at the North Pole, it will unfailingly return to its native river to spawn. The salmon will never deposit her eggs in strange waters.

I went some four hundred paces from our mooring place and lay down in the grass at the edge of the shore. A cold breath rose from the water. As transparent as air, the water lent the stones a trembling shimmer. From time to time trailing white sparks flamed in the depths. The Pacific salmon was on the move. The river current seemed weak to me. I broke a branch of honeysuckle and let it down into the water. It immediately arched and vibrated as though in a wind.

Soon my eyes grew accustomed to the glare and I could distinguish the fish from the wave ripples at the bottom. I saw some males surrounding a dead female. She was lying on her side, a reddish-dove colour, white-eyed, with mouth wide open. Her belly was flat, like all fish who have already deposited their eggs. Death had come to the salmon right there, on the redd. Half a metre from her tail other females who had not yet deposited their eggs were scurrying to and fro.

Four large, strong males were moving about excitedly; they beat the stony bottom with their tails, circled about, and pushed the dead fish with their noses. Sometimes the movement of the fish grew so violent that a phosphorescent circle of bubbles appeared above the dead body. An absurd idea came to me then: the fish, taking leave of their companion, were engaged in a funeral war dance. Then I decided that the males were simply fighting for the dead body.

Finally I tired of watching this endless carousal. And so, without solving the riddle, I went farther up the river and stopped at a stream which crossed my path. Thousands of fish were swimming to the upper reaches, making difficult headway against the strong current. High above the water stood a blackish-green wall of spurge with its heavy, notched leaves. The irises were turning yellow; the briar was in flower; the place abounded in sturdy reddish stalks of the "bear fifes," and white "umbrellas" unfolded at a height of some two metres. I was sorry there were no bees in Kamchatka.

To obtain a better view I took off my boots, rolled up my trousers and walked out to the middle of the stream. It proved shallow, reaching just a bit above the knees, and so cold that in a minute my numbed feet no longer felt the pebbles under them. The fish at first took fright and scattered in all directions, but schools of fish were continuously coming up from the sea and soon my blue calves ceased to trouble the Pacific salmon.

The fish went about their business. Before depositing her eggs the female chose a suitable place. Ploughing into the gravel with her head, fins, body and tail, she scooped out a trough in the stony bed. These merciless blows tore the bodies of many of them into jagged, dove-coloured strips. Humped, disfigured, with a toothy mouth curved like the beak of a bird of prey, she hurried to deposit her eggs and die. From the upper reaches the current was carrying the half-dead bodies of fish that had already deposited their eggs.

While the females were clearing the bottom with their tails, the males stood on guard. About five metres downstream the loaches, speckled, nimble and resembling trout in colour and shape, were darting about. They were waiting for the end of the spawning in order to make a rush for the trough and gobble up the eggs....

Then the fun began! The male salmon, enfeebled by the journey but heavier than the loaches, bravely charged the fish of prey.

Having driven them off, they returned to the females, pushing them with their heads and biting their tails as if wishing to make their mates hurry up with the business of releasing their dangerous burden.

At last, half a metre away from my legs, I saw a female bending and lashing about heavily with her tail as she threw out some pale-pink grains on the cleared bottom. The male jumped forward, shed his milt over the eggs, and then both fish began to cover them with gravel.

Soon a small heap, like those I had seen on my way to the middle of the stream, was formed on the bottom.

Circling over the heap, the mates convinced themselves of the safety of their treasure and slowly swam upstream.

Now their movements were irresolute, and sluggish. Everything was over as far as they were concerned. Doomed to death, they did not know how to spend their last hours; they approached alien redds, circled, drove off loaches, and finally were lost in the powerful stream of fish moving up from the sea.

Clouds came up, a wind rose, and the water began to ripple. My teeth were chattering with the cold as I clambered up on shore and began to rub my numbed feet. It had rather saddened me. To rove all one's life in strange seas, to return in old age to one's native waters and then to turn belly up without even having seen one's offspring. Only such tramps as the Pacific salmon were capable of that.

On my way back I stopped at the spot where the four males had "danced their dance." The dead fish was no longer visible. I scrutinized the bottom and after a long search finally discovered a fishtail sticking up from among the gravel. Evidently the instinct which helped the salmon choose the clearest water for spawning also prompted the males to cover the dead body with gravel.

Half an hour later I returned on board ship. Koloskov was talking with the shore. Sachkov was cleaning the fuel main with a bit of chamois. Like all mechanics, his fingers simply itched when he saw a piece of copper or brass.

He listened to the report of my observations without the slightest interest.

"The laws of nature," he said, yawning. "Fish deposit eggs, fight, die a natural death.... Did you catch one at least?"

"But that's not the point. You've got to understand the quintessence of the thing."

"Well, of course," he laughed. "You take off your trousers and go into the stream.... I'm afraid you won't be a second Darwin anyway."

It was useless to argue with him. Sachkov considered only two objects on earth worthy of his respect: man and engines. I decided to remind him of a monologue delivered one night.

"There are bigger fools. I've heard a machinist talking with his diesel...."

Sachkov looked somewhat embarrassed.

"Was it the pump making a noise, perhaps?" he asked cautiously. "When that devil starts squealing, I myself sometimes think that someone...."

"Well, no.... I could repeat it, even before everybody."

We looked each other straight in the eye.

"Do you know, Alyosha," said Sachkov conciliatingly. "It seems to me that spawning must be rather interesting. Particularly the fish dance, or the fight with the loaches."

"And you, for your part, should oil the pump more often," I advised him. "Seems to me it does talk every once in a while."

The crew began to get ready for its encounter with the schooner. Sachkov changed the grease, inspected the screw and sounded his engine with a stethoscope made of a ramrod and a membrane. I tested the frame and drew a green stripe—the emblem of a coast guard cutter—on the exhaust pipe. Kositsyn started practising flagging a report, while Koloskov, who had been studying Japanese for three months now, sat in the messroom, repeating over and over again:

"*Konnitsi-wa*! Greetings! *Darega sen-choo-san*? Who is captain? *Kono junewa nan-to moosi masu ka*? What's the name of this boat? *Doko kara kookaisiteki masita*? Where from?"

Then he began to practice giving orders, just as if we had already detained the pirates and taken them in tow.

"*Yukinasai*! Let's go! *Togizaki, smokazi*! Helm a-starboard! Helm a-port!"

We had been out the second day. The wind had fallen, but still no schooner. Every half hour we got a report from shore:

"Fog. Bad visibility. Fishermen are unloading four *kungasi.* No schooner in sight."

Koloskov grew gloomy. Waiting became a particularly harassing affair because swarms of mosquitoes attacked us from all sides. Siberian tigers are lambs compared to these raging, bloodthirsty creatures. The air was dull-grey with them and hummed like a balalaika string. Our skin stung even under our monkey jackets. We breathed mosquitoes, ate them with our cereal, drank them with our tea.

Everybody smeared himself all over with wild garlic and crude oil, used his jersey as a mask, wrapped towels around his throat, smoked makhorka mixed with pine needles and leaves. But the hordes kept increasing. If you passed your palm across your neck it came up covered with blood.

Koloskov was in better spirits than the rest of us. His eyes were completely closed as a result of the swellings and his neck was the colour of crushed cherries, but he insisted:

"What's that? They're biting? Nonsense!"

At night, under the blanket, he kept grinding his teeth.

On the third day a warm heavy rain fell at dinner-time. This instantly lightened our tortures. As we sat in the messroom eating the last of our canned goods we could hear the shower beat down on the deck.

Someone remarked that the *Sago-Maru* had docked

for repairs in Hakodate. This wag found others to back him up. There were some friendly but pointed digs about our piscine situation, a hypotenuse without other sides, and the age of the diesel. Of course, most of these were meant for Sachkov. The honest lad sat there blinking, not knowing whether to laugh or to explode.

The commander immediately took Sachkov under his wing.

"What's the idea?" he asked sternly. "It was a good suggestion. On the right track.... And please mind your own business."

We settled down for a lengthy lecture, but just then the telephone rang. Grumbling, Koloskov picked up the receiver. Then he suddenly turned to Sachkov and made a quick motion with his hand.

"Aye, aye, sir!" answered Sachkov, pushing aside his plate and dashing to the engine room.

We made a flying start....

Over three years have passed since then, but I can still see the river, dimpled with the rain, the low shore stretching level with the cutter's sides, and Koloskov's tense face lashed by the rain. And when I shut my eyes I can again hear the engine throbbing, hurrying, beating.... Perhaps it's the beating of my heart—I can't say.

Sachkov got out of that diesel all he could, plus fifty revolutions. The current of the mountain river and our impatience also added to the cutter's speed.

The *Smyeli* cut through the river with such speed that

everything trembled before our eyes. Schools of fish came toward us from the sea. We heard dull thuds as salmon struck the hull. From time to time the fish, frightened by the cutter, would leap out of the water in a curve like a sickle.

The shores receded. It became noticeably lighter. We could not make out the sea because of the downpour, but we felt its strong and fresh breath.

"Now, hold on!" cried Koloskov.

He straightened his cap and planted his feet more firmly. In the same instant I felt that I was swallowing not air but salt water mixed with sand. Something heavy and muddy-yellow in colour was dragging me off the deck, pressing down on my shoulders, bending my knees. I gripped the ladder so tightly that if a wave had torn me away my fists would have remained clinging to it.

The cutter swung down hard against the gravel bottom. She lurched along, all her beams vibrating and straining. We were up to our waists in water. The sea tore into the engine hatches.

Then suddenly everything grew quiet.

Again we sped through the foam. The bars with their pale yellow, two-metre folds of water loomed up behind. The seals, which always lay in wait for the salmon at the river mouths, raised their cat-like heads and inspected the cutter with surprise. The *Smyeli* passed so close to them that I could see their round, dark eyes.

The tide was going out. There was a smell of iodine



coming from the shore; dark green creepers of sea kale lay everywhere. The stony shallow separating the bay from the river was clearly visible through the yellow water.

We were oblivious of the cold and our wet monkey jackets. The *Sago-Maru* was here—spare and brazen, with two red hieroglyphs resembling crabs tacked onto her stern.

She had only just opened the hatches and was getting ready to load the Pacific salmon when the *Smyeli* rounded the shoal and blocked the way to the sea.

The hypotenuse is shorter than the sum of the two other sides. That, finally, the skipper also realized. The *Sago-Maru* blew her whistle to call in the boats. She scurried about, looking for a way out of the trap; finally, in desperation, she rushed for the shoals.

We heard a sound like the ripping of sails. The fishermen on the schooner's deck fell against one another.

The machinist of the *Sago-Maru* shut off his diesel. It grew quiet.

The Japanese stood on deck and watched us with heads lowered.

We dropped a boat and set off toward the schooner to draw up a statement. Just then the fishermen, as if by command, began diving into the water. The last one to dive, after taking off his yellow coverall, was the skipper. The frightened fishermen swam toward our boat for all they were worth.

Something strange was taking place on the schooner. The deck of the *Sago-Maru* swelled, the planks split, glass splintered. It seemed that the schooner, overgorged with fish, was bursting because of her greediness; but thick white smoke came crawling out from all the portholes and chinks.

Koloskov sniffed the air suspiciously.

"Back water!"

His command was lost in the roar of a mighty explosion. The stern of the *Sago-Maru* was cut off as if by a knife. The deck house flew off into the water some thirty metres from us. Something sharp cut Kositsyn's wrist.

The water around the schooner became dirty-white and sizzled noisily.

The cause of the explosion became clear as soon as the characteristic sweetish smell of acetylene reached us.

Japanese fishermen mark their nets with lanterns when they drop them over large areas in the sea. This is the way they warn ships. And every schooner carries cans of carbide for the lanterns.

The bottom of the *Sago-Maru* was pierced when she hit the rocks. Water rushed in through a two-metre hole and immediately flooded the compartment where the carbide was stored. The explosion would have been more powerful had the deck been sturdier.

...We pulled nineteen fishermen out and took them on board. Frightened by the accident, they stood in a knot on the forecastle. The bosun, who not long before

had made fun of Koloskov, now bowed and hissed so fawningly that Kositsyn almost threw up.

After completing the formalities and photographing the schooner, we turned out to sea.

I held the cutter only some two hundred metres from the cannery, but Koloskov ordered me to bring her in still closer.

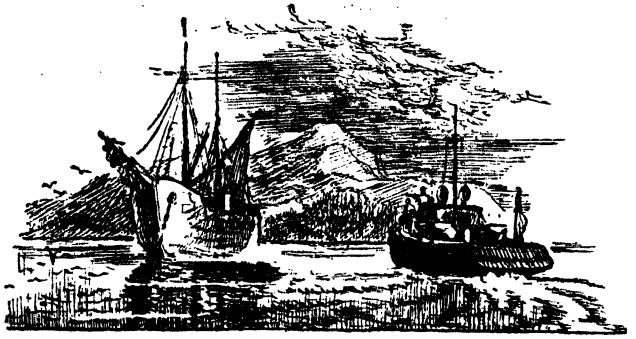
"For educational purposes," he said grimly.

The rain had stopped. High above the shallow where the frame of the *Sago-Maru* was still smoking, the pale disc of the sun cut through the clouds.

I took a last look at the shore. The cone, thoroughly wet, still hung on the tower near the office. Some fishermen were sitting on rollers on the wharf, waiting for *kungasi*.

It occurred to me that from the shore the wet figures of the pirates could be seen perfectly.

1938



BERI-BERI

I WARN you beforehand that if you're expecting to hear some amusing sea adventures you'd better not listen to this story. I can promise you neither a fog nor a storm, for the log book plainly said: sun, calm, temperature 20° in the shade. It was so hot that tar oozed up between the deck planks. We were moving slowly into Bear Bay, tacking about between the islets and the reefs. The men were resting on the forecastle, barely able to wag their tongues. The shadow of the mast lay short, blue and motionless on the deck. The ship's brass was simply blinding in the sun. Only the splash of the water and the white wings of the seagulls breathed a suggestion of something cool.

We were hoping to replenish our reserve of water in the bay. The snow on the hills here does not melt for

quite some time—not before the end of July, at times not until August—and then dozens of mountain streams rush down the gorges to drop from tremendous heights into the bay. The smallest never reach the shore, for the wind catches them on the wing and wafts them off as white spray, but two or three waterfalls do connect the hills and the sea in high arcs. Photographed they register as icicles, but to tell the truth I have never seen a more impressive sight than these bright, rumbling pillars which cut into the green water down to the very bottom.

The rushing of the streams could be heard when the lookout shouted:

"Japanese to port!"

At the very shore stood a white two-masted schooner. No one believed such barefaced insolence possible, but Koloskov, glancing quickly at the schooner, said resolutely:

"Half turn to port—hold it!"

At times like this seconds count. Before the pirates had time to haul in their anchor two of our sailors jumped onto the schooner's deck.

The deck was deserted. The *Genzan-Maru* hadn't even made an attempt to get away. It was as if their own dinghy had pulled up, and not a coast guard cutter.

Yet this smacked of a big fine: wet nets were still hanging on the bamboo poles along the sides.

Sachkov shut off the engine and looked out of the hatch.

"Some prize," he said in vexation. "A fly-killer! Granny's coffin."

Judging by the masts, which were much too heavy for a motor ship, she had been a sailing vessel with good rigging in Bering's days. Her trim lines bespoke seaworthiness, and her four fresh water casks a lengthy cruise. The figure of a girl with flowing hair, crudely hewn out of some dark wood, jutted out for about six metres under the bowsprit. With head inclined, this beauty looked at us out of vacant eyes rimmed with red lead. Time, salt and thick layers of oil paint had distorted her face.

We inspected the schooner in silence.

Evidently the owners were counting more on the possible insurance than on their catch: the juiciest rats could squeeze through the holes in her sides.

"Hey, *anata*!"* Koloskov called out.

The mat covering the stern hatch was lifted. A thin Japanese, his head tied in a blue kerchief, looked up at us with indifferent eyes.

"*Byonin des*,"** he hissed.

"Hey, you, who's the skipper?"

"*Byonin des*," repeated the Japanese in a monotone, and the mat dropped back.

Koloskov went down into the cabin to change into a fresh jacket. Our commander was most punctilious when it came to paying official visits.

* Hey, you!
** Sick.



"Comrade Shirokikh," he said, "find the skipper and line up the Japanese crew along the starboard side."

"Line them up it is!" repeated Shirokikh.

He was a staid, very sensible Siberian with a face pitted by smallpox, white eyebrows and a charming, somewhat sleepy smile which always appeared in answer to Sachkov's and the cook's banter. Beside his thorough and typically plainsman's slowness, he was distinguished for his bull strength—of which, incidentally, he never boasted.

I once remember Shirokikh waist-deep in water, carrying a twelve-pood* anchor from the boat to shore. And this in fresh weather, over big, slimy rocks.

On the *Smyeli* he was pilot.

Lumbering across the deck, Shirokikh lifted the mat and crouched down beside the hatch.

"Who's skipper here?" he asked in a businesslike manner. "Yours take men and go fast to deck."

A groan came up in answer through the hatch.

We saw Shirokikh fling his legs over the top and squeeze painfully through the narrow opening. At first there was much noise in the hold, then suddenly everything grew quiet.

"He talked them over," laughed Sachkov.

But Shirokikh did not show up, and the schooner looked just as dead as before. Dry cod scales glistened on the deck. Only a couple of gaudy *fundosi*, tied to the shrouds with string, pointed to the existence of life on board.

* One pood is equivalent to about 36 pounds.

Finally Shirokikh emerged from the hold. He was redder than usual and in an outstretched hand he held a sheet of paper as if it were a poisonous snake.

"Comrade Lieutenant," he thundered from the schooner's deck. "Permit me to report. I have inspected the stern hold. Have discovered eleven pirates, including the skipper. Three have symptoms of a contagious disease. The others have no boils on their backs. They talk back. They're lying naked."

"What kind of boils? What are you talking about?"

"Probably the black plague.... They groan horribly."

"What's all this nonsense?" asked Koloskov indignantly. He wore a new uniform with two gold stripes and a clean crown over his cap. "Come over—no, stay where you are. Let me see the letter."

Shirokikh handed over the piece of paper on which had been painstakingly printed in Russian:

"Help us. Contagious. Siberian plague. Send please Russian doctor."

If the Japanese had set out especially to disconcert Koloskov they could hardly have thought up anything better. This courageous Baltic sailor, a man of tried and true bravery, was like a child when it concerned anything that savoured of the hospital. Koloskov was twenty when he first heard of the typhus germ, from a company surgeon at the front. A robust, witty fellow, he ridiculed the speaker publicly (in those years Koloskov was firmly convinced that all ailments were caused by dampness).

He was stubborn, but when he saw a drop of water taken from his own flask under the microscope, he was absolutely dumbfounded. As Koloskov himself admitted, it was as if he had been "hit by a shell." The strange hordes of rods, balls and points worked on the sailor's imagination. With the directness of a military man, Koloskov decided to take measures before these "reptiles" swarming everywhere brought him to his pinewood monkey jacket.

He had himself vaccinated against smallpox on both arms, obtained a big bottle of iodine and conscientiously painted every scratch, whether his own or anybody else's. The snake over the bowl (the emblem of medical men) became in his eyes the very embodiment of all human wisdom.

Since then over twenty years had passed, but if you ever meet a sailor who drinks only boiled water or peels his apples, you can be sure it is Koloskov.

Naturally the word "plague" rather stunned our commander. If the pirates had opened fire on us or tried to get away from under our very noses, Koloskov would have immediately known how to act. But in this case, with the deserted deck of the schooner in front of him, the lieutenant involuntarily stopped to consider. His rich experience and natural prudence made him suspicious of the note.

"Tell me—just what symptoms did you see?"

"The smell is foul, Comrade Commander."

"That's the fish. What else?"

"They have black blisters on their legs. Besides, their eyes are inflamed."

But Koloskov had already gotten the better of his timidity.

"The plague doesn't come from putrid cod. They made the blisters themselves. Simulators. However, go to the forecastle. Take green soap and a solution of carbolic acid. Do you understand? So that not a single microbe...."

...That year I combined the duties of helmsman and ship's medical orderly. Opening the medicine chest, I found some mercuric chloride and at the commander's orders soaked two handkerchiefs in it. He also ordered us to put on the yellow hooded coveralls which are used during gas drill.

Covering our mouths with our homemade masks, we boarded the *Genzan-Maru* and made a close inspection of the schooner.

She was a tub of about three hundred tons with high washboards which turned at the stern into a queer railing with balusters such as are to be found only on provincial balconies.

Japanese schooners have never been noted for freshness, but this one was quite the worst we had ever come across. The deck, the gratings and the wooden drains were so saturated with grease and slime that even the use of high-pressure steam could not have effaced the sweetish stench which polluted the air for a radius of half a mile.

Everything here reminded one of the vessel's difficult and wretched old age. The blue oil paint which had once covered the superstructures had curled up into dry scales. The copper bell had turned the colour of slime. All about was grey, dead wood, rusty iron, dirty sails. Even the oak gratings covering the deck crumbled under our heels as we walked.

But the windlass and the pulleys had just been repainted with red lead, and there were neat coils of new rope: the old rule of the Japanese proprietors still served —not to stint when it came to the tackle.

The two forward holds, covered with mats, were packed full of salmon and cod. The rigidity of the fish and the damp glitter of the scales proved that the catch had only just been made.

"It's quite clear that they're simulating," said Koloskov angrily.

We looked into the stern orlop and called the skipper. A groan came in answer. A man was crouching and wailing as he clutched at his head with both hands. The wail was caught up by no less than ten throats. It was hard to decide whether the Japanese were overjoyed by the appearance of human beings or whether they were complaining of the heat and the stink in the hold.

A skinny Japanese in a corduroy jacket, his head tied with a towel, screamed louder than the others. Pressing against the bunk with his shoulders and heels, he arched his body and let out ear-splitting yells.

In the gloom we counted nine Japanese. Half-naked and wet with sweat, the men lay side by side. For several minutes we watched their wide-open mouths and listened to their wailing, which would have disconcerted even a dog driver. Then Koloskov coughed and said resolutely:

"Hey, *anata*! That's quite enough."

The chorus of the afflicted rolled forth in still greater frenzy.

The ancient tub seemed to rock with the cries. Many even drummed with their naked heels on the floor.

Koloskov, who could not tolerate any sign of opposition, exploded at this.

He yelled down into the hold, as if into a barrel:

"Hey, you! 'Ten—shun!"

Immediately they all fell silent. We could even hear the water splashing about in the hold.

"Where is the skipper?"

The man in the corduroy jacket who had made the most noise crawled out of the orlop, and mixing Japanese, English and Russian explained that the most seriously afflicted had been isolated. Continuing to howl, he led us to the orlop in the bow.

In a narrow compartment tapering downward three more Japanese were stretched out on a mat.

"*Varui des*! *Taihen varui des*!"* said the skipper rather calmly.

* Bad, very bad.

With these words he took a bamboo stick and unceremoniously threw off the rags covering the sick men.

We saw living corpses covered with scales of dirt and black ulcers; they had monstrously swollen calves crisscrossed with swollen veins. The ribs of the wretched men stuck out like the stripped frame of a schooner. Evidently they had been wetting their beds for some time, for ammonia fumes made our eyes smart.

Living beings were rotting away in this stuffy den with filthy portholes covered by some green paper.

Beside the sick men, on the mats dotted with fish scales and grains of low-grade rice, stood bowls with hunks of salt cod.

"Poor fishman! No live. Die," said our guide.

As if by command, the three Japanese stretched out their ghastly hands, blackened, twisted and mutilated by some strange disease. I do not know how plague patients look, but I had never seen a sight sadder than this.

The skipper had at his command some fifty Russian words and about as many English. Mixing three languages, he tried to tell us of the schooner's misfortune.

"*Eto bilo v subotsu—silny tumanka.** Go here, go there, see nothing. *Skosi mo miemasen.*** Compass tell lie, probly. Roved little bit. Suddenly Arita fall. One minute—fishman go black. Like coal. Two minutes

* That was on Saturday—heavy fog.
** Could see nothing.

Miura fall. Three minutes—Toyama. *Komatta ne.** Suddenly shore. *Chto?*** Russian land? Is news!"

Koloskov calmly listened to his ravings. Looking at the sick men, over the skipper's shoulder, he said dryly:

"Very well. But where did you catch the fish?"

"*Sa-a.*... He always strong," answered the skipper sadly. "What tell his poor papa and mama?"

"I'm asking you when and where did you catch the fish?"

"Yes, yes... Arita burn like fire. Probly is black plague."

"Don't you understand? Where's the fish from?"

"Honest God, no understand," said the wretch, bending down low from the waist. "We so afraid be alone."

He waved his hand, and the sick men confirmed the hopelessness of their condition with barbaric cries.

We went up on deck followed by their groans and the mutterings of the skipper. Koloskov angrily tore off the mask steeped in mercuric chloride.

"Have you ever seen anyone sick with the black plague?"

"Only in pictures," I confessed.

"Strange."

"Yes. The fish is fresh."

I wanted, at all events, to remove the lamp for start-

* Misfortune.
** What?

ing up the engine, but Koloskov would not permit me to go down into the engine room.

"You should realize," he said grimly, "that the black plague is not a weed. You can't pull it out by hand."

* * *

We could not possibly bring the schooner into port. We got in touch with headquarters and in ten minutes received an answer.

"Doctor and orderlies sent out. Meet and isolate our landing party. Stand away from schooner, continue your observations."

We began our vigil.

We were faced with the prospect of spending six hours eye-to-eye with the plague-ridden schooner.

It was noontime—sunny and sultry, in spite of the snowcapped hills encircling the bay. Around the schooner drifted small blobs of foam and the intestines of sperm whales bloated by the heat—a sign that a whaling expedition was somewhere in the vicinity. In the distance these intestines looked like bunches of heavy, rusty ship chains. Perched on them were trim and noisy seagulls.

The deck of the *Genzan-Maru* was teeming with flies. Soon they began to penetrate into the *Smyeli's* orlops. Koloskov ordered us to move a couple of cable lengths away from the schooner.

We dined poorly. The borsch, bread, roast and even the mustard smelt of carbolic. At the lieutenant's order

our cook, Kostya Skvortsov, went through the ship with a sprayer, replenishing it every minute with a fresh solution of disinfectant.

"Everything in good time," he explained, his blue eyes beaming. "First carbolic, then chloride. The clothes off into the steam room.... Vaccinations.... Then quarantine for three weeks."

Kostya was something of an alarmist, but this time many shared his fears. The schooner stood alongside of us, unpeopled, quiet. And this quiet held something sinister.

Shirokikh felt worse than anybody else. Scrubbed with green soap and a solution of carbolic, he sat naked to the waist in the forecastle, while we vied with one another to cheer him up.

We all felt sorry for Shirokikh. He was an excellent pilot, and played at left half on the football team—and now what did the future hold out to him? Patient, thick-lipped, very serious, he swatted the horseflies and sighed as he looked at his comrades.

We consoled Shirokikh as best we could.

"My uncle also took sick with cholera in Rostov," said our cook slowly. "He ate two melons and a bowl of sour cream.... Well, that's far worse than the black plague. For three days he kept on vomiting (just like Kositsyn), until all his insides turned. He became as thin as a board and so weak that he could hardly thumb his nose at his relatives when they decided to administer com-

munion. Then Comrade Gritsai arrived. Haven't heard of him? He was our district doctor. He pumped my uncle's stomach and injected some dog serum."

"Calf. . . ."

"What's the difference? The next morning he died."

"Get out!" said Shirokikh, wincing.

"But that was cholera. You think you're sick already? Just take a look at yourself in the mirror."

They gave Shirokikh the thermometre again. He put it awkwardly under his armpit, quite ruffled.

"Do you feel cold?"

"A little."

Mitya Korzinkin, our radioman, brought in and silently (he did everything silently) gave Shirokikh a pack of Troika cigarettes he had been saving against shore leave.

"If it comes to the worst, you can have a blood transfusion," said the bosun. "We'll each give half a litre."

"The most important thing, Kostya, is not to say die!"

"Don't think about it. Think about girls."

"That's right," said Shirokikh submissively. "That's what I should do."

He wrinkled his forehead and began to gaze at the play of sunbeams on the water.

Shirokikh dined alone. He ate a bowl of cereal, a double portion of breef stew and five slices of bread and butter.

The cook, with whom Shirokikh was constantly on the

outs because of second helpings, brought a whole quart mug of cocoa.

"Let's see how sick you are," he said grimly.

Shirokikh thought awhile, sighed, and drank down the cocoa. That calmed all of us somewhat.

"Ever see such a plague-stricken man?" the cook asked sarcastically.

Finally, seeing that the general sympathy was depressing the fellow, Koloskov prohibited all talk in the forecastle.

Everybody set about his business. The radioman got down to tapping out the reports, Sachkov to tinkering with the donkey engine, Kositsyn to polishing the gratings over the hatches.

But Shirokikh's eyes kept wandering sadly. His hands were itching.

The bosun gave him the end of an inch-thick rope and Shirokikh immediately livened up, smiled and even began to hum softly.

Koloskov marched up and down the deck, the brim of his cap pushed forward over his peeling nose, and cast suspicious glances at the schooner from time to time.

Finally he went up to Shirokikh and asked in a professional tone:

"Got the colic?"

"No—that is, a little, Comrade Commander."

"Have any spasms?"

"Not yet."

"Then there won't be any," said Koloskov unexpectedly, and immediately barked out: "Forecastle men, to the forecastle! Heave up the anchor!"

We started off, circled, and approached closer to the schooner. The skipper immediately thrust his head, still bound in a towel, out of the hatch.

"Hey, *anata*!" shouted Koloskov. "Yours to stay here. Ours go for doctor."

Hearing that we were forsaking the schooner, the sick men let out an ear-splitting cry. They were all evidently afraid to remain alone in this remote, desolate bay, but the skipper immediately calmed the frightened fishermen.

"Good—good," he said in a sad sing-song. "Russian doctor—good."

He hung his head, bent his knees and froze in a timid pose—a living statue of despair.

The bay in which the *Genzan-Maru* was anchored twisted like the chimney of a samovar. When we had passed the first bend and come up to a low rock island, I involuntarily glanced at the commander.

"Here?"

"Well, of course," said Koloskov.

The rock concealed even the masts. A better place for an ambush would have been hard to find. In low speed we manoeuvred between the sharp rocks jutting out of the water and stopped in the shadow of the island.

"Then they're simulating?" asked the bosun. "That's just what I thought."

Shirokikh smiled and pulled his jersey straight.

"Am I free?"

"After the doctor's examination," said the relentless Koloskov.

We shut off the engine and became all ears. The seagulls, frightened by the cutter, darted over the masts, swearing worse than market women. Through the hullabaloo of the birds and the lapping of the waves came some intermittent sounds. The Japanese were evidently trying to start their cold engine.

Hearing the familiar sounds, Koloskov stretched his neck, smiled and wriggled his moustache. He looked like an inveterate angler who has suddenly felt his float jerk.

A wave crashed against the island. The sound of the engine drew closer and became clearer. Suddenly it fell silent for half a minute and then started throbbing again, but this time irregularly and with a hollow sound.

We started our engine. The men went to their stations. The *Smyeli* trembled, ready to rush out in pursuit of those brazen rascals.

Suddenly the bosun gave a disillusioned cry from the stern:

"Akh, the devil! Just look...."

Ten metres away, in a gap between the rocks, lay an overturned *bat** which had evidently been carried off

* A boat hollowed out from the trunk of a tree.

from some settlement by the river. Each time a wave hit the boat it struck the rock and made jerky but rhythmic sounds.

We were so vexed by this unexpected prank of the sea that we did not believe our ears when we heard the familiar chug-chug-chug-chug from beyond the bend.

This time it was the *Genzan-Maru*. She flew out from behind a little promontory some fifty metres away, spitting hot water and rushing toward the open sea. Rings of smoke rose from the schooner's funnels, her screw tore savagely at the water, and the whole crew was crowded up on deck. The plague-ridden skipper was rushing back and forth on the deck, hurrying the plague-ridden sailors. The sick bosun was lying on his stomach and fishing with a hook for the anchor, which had got stuck.

At sight of us the *Genzan-Maru* wriggled off to the side but Koloskov calmly ordered us to lie on a parallel course. The schooner's engine was too weak for her heavy hull, while ours was working perfectly.

Ten minutes later the Japanese shut off their Bolinder, and Koloskov, Kositsyn and I boarded the schooner. Koloskov was enraged by the audacity of the Japanese. Trying to keep his temper, he spoke very quietly. The skipper kept hissing and walking backwards, bowing like a wound up toy.

"How are your—plaguy men?" asked Koloskov.

"Thank you. Probly, very bad."

"Why didn't you wait for the doctor?"

"*Sa-a.* . . . Die here, die home. Poor fishmen think it all same."

The skipper was getting ready to start wailing again, but Koloskov immediately calmed him.

"Well, well," he said dryly. "I think you're nearer prison than the grave."

Soon the cutter with the doctor approached and all our doubts vanished. The schooner had as many men sick with the plague as we had bishops on our cutter.

The skipper himself admitted as much. The schooner had noticed the cutter too late to get away, and the speed of the old ark packed with cod was ridiculously low. Then the black plague made its appearance with lightning speed. The wailing chorus and the note were only a trick, calculated to take in simpletons. According to the skipper, they had twice used this method off the coast of Canada, and both times the coast guard cutters had pulled out hastily and left the *Genzan-Maru* to her fate.

Three fishermen had not come up on deck during the check up. But these were really sick. Beri-beri, the disease of the poor, a frequent guest of fishing villages and schooners, had stricken the fishermen lying on the mats. This disease is the sister of hunger. The fishermen's daily diet of wild rice and salt fish leads to a complete breakdown.

The men of the *Genzan-Maru* had fallen ill the previous spring. At first they tried to hide the symptoms of beri-beri, performing their hard work on a par with the

rest. But the men on schooners sleep together, on the same mats, almost naked....

According to the rules the sick men should have been immediately put ashore, but the skipper calculated that until the end of the season they could at least work off their advance pay.

They were given "light" work: baiting the hooks and cutting up the catch (naturally at half rate).

They had conscientiously worked off the fifty yen, the dry cod and the coarse blue jackets their boss had advanced them, and now they were patiently awaiting the end of their last cruise. Judging by the hollows under their eyes and their mortified extremities, it was not far off. One fisherman was already suffering from gangrene: both his legs were an ashy-black up to the knees.

The rascallion of a skipper had made excellent use of the sinister symptoms of beri-beri. The boils and ulcers which covered the bodies of the fishermen he had passed off as symptoms of the black plague.

Koloskov ordered macaroni, coffee and butter sent up to the sick men. They did not touch the food. And when the orderly again visited the fishermen the plates by some miracle proved to be in the skipper's cabin.

"These people no used to good food," said the skipper coolly.

In the evening we lifted anchor and set out for headquarters with the *Genzan-Maru*. The schooner followed the *Smyeli* under her own power. The bow hatch was

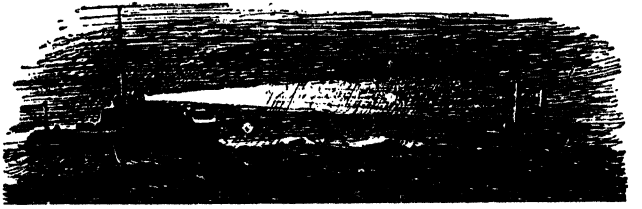
open and a lantern flickered on the ceiling. Standing at the clumsy helm I could see the resigned faces of the sick men.

They were waiting. Nothing made any difference to them.

The wind rose. The *Genzan-Maru* began to roll and pitch, her black mast tracing figures of eight in the sky. Stars, first one, then another, flew out of their niches and streaked across the sky to fall into the dark, hissing sea.

At dawn the *Smyeli* came up to the schooner's side. I turned over the watch to Shirokikh, went back to the cutter, and fell fast asleep.

1939



THE COMMANDANT OF BIRD ISLAND

I

SHE was an obstinate schooner. Before finally shutting off her engine and hanging out fenders, the *Kobe-Maru* played a game of hide-and-seek, taking cover behind a cliff. When this dodge failed, she began to thrash about the bay like a hooked cod. Then followed an idiotic race around two islets, and attempts to lead the *Smyeli* onto the reefs, to ram us with her prow, to jostle us with her stern, in a word, she resorted to all the petty ruses in her arsenal.

Protecting the *Smyeli's* hull from risky collisions, Koloskov steered us on a course parallel with the *Kobe-Maru*.

We were wet to the skin, raging mad and most sincerely wished the schooner at the bottom of the sea. Bosun Gutorov, who for the past half hour had been standing on the forecastle with a boat hook, voiced this reasonable desire, and got an immediate reprimand from the commander.

"And then call in deep-sea divers to question them?" grumbled Koloskov. "Aha, they're cornered! They see the game's up."

At last he was able to slide up to the Japanese boat and two of our men sprang onto her deck.

"*Konnitsi-wa!* Good day!" said the chastened skipper.

He stood on the forecastle near the winch, bowing low.

The nets were empty. The holds glistened with the scales of former catches. And the crew, to a man, was dressed in fresh overalls still unrumpled by use. The high rubber boots (without a single patch) fastened on top to their belts gave the fishermen a sturdy, even military, appearance.

We found the radioman, sullen and obstinate, in a lean-to next to the skipper's cabin. This little man in a striped jersey, had locked himself in and was tapping off Morse messages so fast that one would think the *Kobe-Maru* was sinking.

Putting the radio room under lock and seal, we lined the Japanese along the rail. The military bearing of these "fishermen" was really amazing. Judging by their carriage and the military precision of their movements, they were as familiar with the *Arisaki** as with the *kavasaki.*

Under the linoleum on the floor of the skipper's cabin

Japanese army rifle.

we found a Mauser, two Zeiss cameras, a theodolite, a box of photographic plates and other "fishing tackle."

The last to be found was tracing paper with some plans drawn on it in a free but skilful and firm hand.

The Japanese refused outright to proceed to headquarters under their own power, so we had to take them in tow. They had already managed to place some bits of cork and felt in different parts of the fuel main. Ordering the crew down into the orlop and making fast the towline, we dragged the schooner out of the bay with some effort.

...It grew noticeably cooler. The waves rose higher and the whitecaps scattered into spray. Now and again the *Smyeli* pitched into a wave, and the water flew noisily over the pilot's bridge, stinging our hands and faces.

The blood-red sky promised a difficult voyage. There was a squally head wind, and the short, taut towline vibrated at our stern.

Half way to headquarters, the *Smyeli* began to pitch. Water frothed on deck all the time now.

No longer a free agent because of the rigid towline, the schooner rolled and tripped up against the crests as she dragged after us. The *Kobe-Maru* probably had a worse time than we, for the rope prevented her from rising freely with the waves.

Soon we could only make out the breakers following in our wake. The shore which had been looming up darkly on the right disappeared. The low rumble and hiss of

the boundless waters muffled the throbbing of the engine. A squall struck the cutter with such force that it tore the bridge tarpaulin into shreds and ripped the cover off the dinghy.

Shaking and groaning under the heavy blows, the *Smyeli* progressed slowly through the darkness. There was not a star or a light to be seen. The commander ordered the searchlight turned on and went to the stern to inspect the towline.

I was at the wheel when Koloskov returned to the bridge, and I heard him mutter under his breath in an effort to convince himself:

"The devil! He won't melt. Of course. . . ."

We were thinking the same thing. Behind us, on the deserted deck of the schooner, stood two of our men: bosun Gutorov and machinist's apprentice Kositsyn. Gutorov could be relied on. He was quick and as hard as nails, and had a good head on his shoulders. He came from the village of Kerba, known for its fishermen and hunters, and was more firmly rooted on a ship's deck than a bollard. But Kositsyn worried us. Many a time we had dragged him on deck from the engine room, limp, green, with glazed eyes. On shore he livened up and displayed the common sense and tenacity of the peasant, but at sea he grew as soft as hardtack dipped in hot tea. What could be done about it if the plainsman could stand neither the roll of a ship nor the dampness?

To calm the commander I said:

"He'll be all right. Out in the fresh air it'll be easier."

"Yes! I think so too," said Koloskov, and then immediately changed his tone. "What's all this? What are you talking about? Are you at the compass or in a pub?"

We were already near Uglovoi Lighthouse when the sailor at the towline cried out.

I suddenly felt the cutter moving at a suspiciously high speed, turned, and saw the bow waves quickly vanishing behind us. Out of the darkness came Kositsyn's voice, muffled by a squall:

"... rade Commander! ... mrade ... ander!"

It was impossible to make out what else he was shouting, and we didn't even try. Veering sharply, the *Smyeli* went to the aid of the schooner.

The searchlight quickly found the *Kobe-Maru*—amidst the black waters she shone like a moth—then the ray circled round her and settled on the waves. Suddenly Koloskov, the signalman and I shouted all together: "Stand from under!"

Two men were floundering in the storm-crazed waters. They were fighting. The crests beat them mercilessly but they continued to struggle. Grappling and gasping, each tried to pull the other under. The searchlight blinded them but still they did not let go. Now and again the waves bore the swimmers high above us, over the rumbling, groaning sea, then dropped them, but they continued to fight.

The sea separated them but they rushed at each other again. When we approached the scene of battle and threw out a line, only one of them grabbed it....

It was Gutorov.

Bleeding, exhausted, he lay face downward and muttered:

"Kositsyn's alone—on the schooner."

"Full speed ahead!" Koloskov ordered.

"Aye, aye, sir! Full speed ahead!" came the echo from the engine room.

The *Smyeli* trembled but did not budge.

"Engine room!"

Sachkov made an inaudible reply. The water behind the stern was churned white, the hull shook and creaked as it strained forward—yet we crawled at the rate of a floating crane.

Koloskov ordered us to inspect the screw. A rope was holding us back. A huge, swollen lump of it was trailing along behind our stern, cutting down our speed and manoeuvrability. Probably a whole coil of sturdy Manila cordage had been washed off the schooner's deck, and a hundred metres or so had wound itself around our screw when the cutter ran into it.

We stopped the engine and got into the water to hack off and untangle the knots. Meanwhile the bosun, his teeth chattering, reported what had happened on the schooner.

"...Kositsyn was at the wheel. I was examining the

towline. Just then a wave smashed the glass in the deck-house. At the sound the Japanese made an attempt to get on deck. I ran to the orlop and secured the door with an oar—the catch was rather weak. All of a sudden a 'fisherman' came crawling out of some opening, maybe the rope box. He managed to cut the towline with a knife and tried to trip me up. Just then the schooner heeled over. . . ."

Gutorov did not know what had happened to Kositsyn. He gulped a glass of vodka, tied a rope around his waist and crawled into the water again, because no one else could remain underwater for more than half a minute.

We cleared the screw but continued to roll about in the same place, for the shaft had been torn off and the propeller-boss was loose. The engine panted like a baited beast, and the *Smyeli* could not even pull out against the wind. . . .

The *Smyeli* became a plaything of the waters while the schooner moved farther and farther away. The searchlight reached as far as the trucks of the masts, which kept nodding in all directions at the sea—like small, light blades of grass amidst the angry waters. These too finally disappeared from sight.

It's hardly worth trying to recall how we spent the night. I'll only say that in spite of the gale we found the deck hot enough. And in the hold a motor pump and four hand donkeys were kept going all the time.

The sea smashed all the washboards from the bridge to the capstan, swept the dinghy overboard, and to top it all, broke the glass of the searchlight, badly cutting signalman Sazhin.

At daybreak we saw a mutilated cutter and malicious, dull-grey waters.

Her siren screaming, the icebreaker *Truvor* came up. Koloskov, glummer than the sea, turned away from the *Truvor* and ordered a towline prepared.

At dawn our whole detachment was on its feet. Without waiting for our return to port the commander of the brigade had sent out six cutters and a wing of aircraft. Foot and cavalry patrols went south, searching every cove for the schooner.

That same day, after replacing the propeller shaft and screw, we again took to sea. The storm had died down; the horizon was clear. But not a single fisherman for a stretch of a hundred miles to the south of Cape Sobol had seen the lights of the floundering schooner.

Only on the fourth day did we learn what had happened to the *Kobe-Maru*. Here's the story of Kositsyn's adventures.

II

"Comrade Commander!" cried Kositsyn.

There was no answer. The schooner's hull rumbled under the blows of the waves. The water on deck hissed as it met the sea.

He cupped his hands and cried out again into the darkness, toward the whitecaps gleaming in the wind:

"Comrade Command—er!"

Kositsyn was alone on the wet deck illumined only by silvery foam. He was seized with a fierce longing to hear his comrades' voices, to see, at least in the distance, the outlines of the coast guard cutter. He continued to shout, turning this way and that, for he had lost all sense of direction. Every once in a while he paused to catch breath and listen for an answer, but all he heard was the low rumble of the sea.

A sudden flash of light made Kositsyn turn. To starboard a searchlight beam was gliding from wave to wave. The light was weak. Distant, enfeebled by the sea spray, it was patiently groping its way through space to the schooner. Kositsyn immediately felt warmer and happier in spite of the cold and his soaking monkey jacket. The sea might be boundless but he would not be lost in it. They would find him.

He returned to the wheel and tried to guide the bow into the waves. He failed. With her engine dead, the *Kobe-Maru* was turned this way and that, her sides exposed to the waves.

Meanwhile the distance between the two boats was growing. The crests turned more restless and sharper. Now the beams of the searchlight only reached the tips of the masts. Evidently the *Smyeli* could not overcome the waves. Screwing up his eyes, Kositsyn tried hard to de-

cipher the signal flashes blinking from the truck of the *Smyeli.* They were scrappy, almost disconnected. Standing there, chilled to the bone, he made out:

"... Repair ... come to you ... turn on side lights ... jib ... at worst ... shore."

"Aye, aye, hold it!" said Kositsyn by force of habit, and again the sea grew dark.

The schooner was borne on heedless of her wheel, without side lights, reeling and trembling like a drunkard.

She drifted past Cape Shipunsky and its fringe of breakers, past the cliff topped by a lighthouse which radiated brief flashes out into the sea, past the entrance to the cove where the detachment was stationed, and farther and farther southward.

Kositsyn took down the side lanterns and tried to light them, shielding the matches with his monkey jacket. The water drummed on his back, and the wind and the spray blew the matches out. Finally he managed to light one wick but an unexpected side wave flooded the oil cup and bore off his box of matches. With a heavy heart he rehung the dark lanterns.

Dawn was approaching. The waves continued to crowd around the helpless schooner.

Kositsyn had frequent need to lean over the side. He could not get accustomed to the pitching, and each time, as he returned to the wheel pale and dazed, he said to himself: "Now that's enough! Damn it! Enough, I say!"

But again he would bend over, clinging to the rail.

When it grew quite light he took a pail and washed the telltale traces of his weakness from the oak grating. Fortunately, the deck was deserted.

With the dawn Kositsyn gradually got a better grip on himself. He had to do something, take the helpless schooner in hand.

He unfastened his holster, cautiously removed the oar which held the door fast, and motioned to the skipper to come up on deck. As a precaution he immediately shut the orlop fast again.

"*Anata*!" he said as resolutely as he could. "You must start the engine going, do you hear, *anata*?"

"What for? We don't need it."

The skipper had not even deigned to look at the sailor. He stood scratching himself and yawning. This infuriated Kositsyn.

"What's this, back talk? They're my orders!"

"How nice. I refuse."

The engine had been tampered with by the machinist the evening before. Kositsyn glanced at the mast and at the dark roll of sail, thought awhile, and then took out his revolver.

"What?" asked the skipper quickly. "What do you want?"

"That's my business. Now, raise the jib!"

They looked straight at each other, then the skipper turned and walked slowly to the mast. Kositsyn replaced his revolver.

A low fog stretched off the starboard down to the very horizon. From time to time they could hear the distant thunder of the surf. As always in shallow places, the rollers were huge.

"We'll smash up," thought Kositsyn. "Sure to smash up." But when the jib rose the wheel began to obey him. Kositsyn resolutely turned the schooner toward the fog.

He was so chilled and so homesick for terra firma that he would have gladly hit the rocks, run into a shoal or even landed on the devil's back itself, just so long as that back were steady. Furthermore, with the coming of dawn the danger of meeting a Japanese schooner increased.

The skipper brought the sheet of the sail aft and sat down on the washboard opposite Kositsyn. He was very uneasy: he kept turning and twisting, listening to the roar of the surf. To hear better he even removed the kerchief he wore to protect his ears from the wind. Finally he blurted out:

"This sure dangerous."

Kositsyn did not answer. The fog was rising. He could see the high rollers, the shore and the dark green covering of the hills.

"Common sense is the weapon of the brave," said the skipper hurriedly. "If you like, we lower dinghy for you.

"I don't understand. Never learned Japanese."

"Seems I speak Russian!"

"And to me it seems that the words are Russian but the idea is Japanese."

The skipper looked at the young, set face of the helmsman and immediately eased off the sheet.

"Now there!" said Kositsyn menacingly, and the end of the jib was pulled up again.

Land was close by, but the seven-foot breakers were nearer still. Kositsyn stared over the skipper's hat at the hill, lost in thought. Too bad they were moving so slowly. She'd turn broadside to shore, most certainly. "Well now, hold on!" he said to himself, pulling down hard on the wheel.

"Don't, Ivan!" shouted the skipper.

"I know what I'm at! Leave me alone!"

The skipper ran to the door, pushed out the oar, and all the Japanese rushed up from the orlop to the deck, yelling.

The *Kobe-Maru* was being carried right into a hill, a dark-green hill covered with a growth as curly as lamb's wool.

They dropped the anchor but the schooner had already turned broadside to the shore and struck the rocks. Water mixed with gravel thundered over the side and swept off the men.

III

They had come to Bird Island, a low mound of sand and stone surrounded by sullen waters. Kositsyn realized it just as soon as the sun cleared the fog, and the mottled mountains of the continent loomed up beyond the strait.

Everything could be seen from the top of the hill: the shore fringed with noisy waves, the strip of pebbles and seaweed, the sticks on which wet linen hung, and even the barnacles on the bottom of the capsized *Kobe-Maru*. The sea breathed deeply and freely as it slapped gently against the motionless schooner; patches of oil still gleamed on the sloping billows, and mats bobbed up and down.

A bonfire was smoking down below. Six half-naked Japanese were sitting around a pot, taking turns at the noodles and looking wryly at the hill.

Kositsyn took off everything but his shorts and his revolver. On land he felt far stronger than at sea, though the scratches on his shoulders still pained and he had a bitterish taste in his mouth from the salt water. This was land. Hot and steady! Standing in the breeze, he calmly turned now toward the prisoners, now to the sea.

This island was Soviet. He had been here on former cruises. They had come here sometimes for target drill; here they had gathered wild garlic and seagulls' eggs in their caps. Let them whisper among themselves at the pot: the schooner was wrecked and they couldn't get very far in their dinghy.

The pungent odour of the grass and the warm air sweeping over the rocks made Kositsyn sleepy. Pulling on his trousers and damp monkey jacket, he decided to go around the island, following the shore line.

A bad business! No sooner did his legs touch the sand than all his muscles began to ache, grow flabby and beg for mercy. Exhausted by the stormy sea, Kositsyn was all but ready to stretch out at the foot of the hill. What? Lie down? He pinched himself pitilessly, and, dragging his feet, continued his painful walk.

The island had no streams, no trees, no shade. It was overgrown with a tough, curling grass. Only birds inhabited it. Black fat puffins rose up from the water, with difficulty flew some one hundred metres, and dived into holes in the slope. But the seagulls soared high on their strong wings. They boldly fought in the air and only occasionally came to rest on the very highest rocks.

The whole eastern side was cluttered with damp rubbish. Kositsyn examined it all with interest, and, practical peasant that he was, gazed longingly at the forlorn wealth of the sea. There were dented, rusty barrels, glass floats in corded nets, bottles, bamboo sticks, bits of netting, mats, the scarlet claws of crabs, stinking seaweed with bulbs atop every stalk, scraps of oars, rope, the crumbling bones of whales, pumice stone, boards bearing the names of boats, life belts which had never saved anyone, starfish, jellyfish melting among the seaweed like lumps of ice in spring, rotting tarpaulin. Everything was dead, damp, covered with salt crystals.

Higher up, beyond this graveyard, stretched heaps of dry white brushwood. This gave Kositsyn the idea of building a bonfire, a tall smoke signal fire which would

be visible from sea both by day and by night. But when he approached the Japanese and asked them to carry branches from the shore to the ridge, no one budged. The skipper didn't even want to share his matches with him.

"*Skosi mo vakarimasen,*" he laughed.

Seven fishermen were sucking down their noodles with evident relish. They had managed to remove from the schooner and conceal under the seaweed a case of noodles and some packages of hardtack, and now they watched the hungry sailor ironically.

"No understand," the skipper translated graciously.

Kositsyn's face darkened. He could get along without water and without bread, since that concerned only himself. But matches.... A bonfire must be lit. Narrowing his eyes, he said very quietly:

"Again back talk? Now then?!"

Only then did the smile fade, and the skipper threw him a box of matches.

What to do with the "fishermen" now was beyond Kositsyn's comprehension. He was only twenty-two, knew how to handle engines and could find his way by a compass, but he had never been stranded on an island alone with Japanese.

He did not, however, worry overmuch. In his clean uniform and monkey jacket buttoned up to the top, he felt that he was the one and only master of the land on which some suspicious "fishermen" were sitting around,

smacking their lips with gusto. The Japanese had to be put in their place right at the start. Particularly since the mainland lay only some two miles away.'

To put them in their place.... But how? He recalled Koloskov's unhurried speech and manner of speaking at meetings with one arm behind his back and the other in the lapel of his jacket. He straightened up and said grimly:

"Hey, there, mate! Make my stand clear to the crew. You are now on an island. That is No. 1. There is not much land here, but all of it is our land, Soviet land. That is No. 2. So the rules here will be our rules. No going away without leave. No tricks will be tolerated. Be sensible and keep order. If anything happens I will punish with all due severity as commandant. Any questions?"

"Yes," said the skipper quickly. "You commandant? Good. Then give orders us be fed. First, give rice, second—fish, third—dessert. Well?"

He looked exultantly at Kositsyn. Imitating him, the entire crew turned to the sailor. but they did not stop eating.

The commandant thought awhile, choosing his words.

"I can't promise you the rice," he said gravely. "Then, you'll have to wait a bit for the fish. But you'll get your desserts. Without fail. And a double dose too."

Kositsyn had to gather the brushwood himself. Nine times he went down to the shore and nine times he car-

ried to the top of the hill armfuls of branches as bare as horns and washed white by the sea.

He lit a bonfire immediately, but the brushwood was thin and dry. The flames quickly consumed the branches, emitting practically no smoke. Then he brought several armfuls of seaweed from the shore. Soon brownish smoke pillars rose over the island.

In a stony depression on top of the hill Kositsyn found a puddle of warm rain water. First he drank his fill and then even washed the crown of his cap. Then he searched his pockets in the hope of finding something edible. What he dug out was a bit too hard to bite: a penknife, buttons, an empty rifle cartridge. All this was covered with bits of paper and a sticky reddish mess. Kositsyn remembered that the evening before he had put two slices of bread smeared with red caviar into his pocket (it is easier to stand the roll if the hold is well packed).

He drew out several blobs of this salty mess and began to chew slowly, washing it down with water from the puddle. Near the bonfire the commandant found some seagull nests. In each lay three warm, bluish eggs. He gulped down about ten. The seagulls circled overhead, trying to get their beaks into his cap.

After breakfasting he again felt drowsy. The sun shone so evenly, so gently, that his eyelids closed of themselves. The commandant turned to scan the horizon. But the sea, calm after the storm, was a shimmering blue that blinded the eyes. To evade temptation he decided to put his "com-

mand post" in order. He cleared the site of big stones, set them in a semicircle, built a sort of bench and then beat a path along the eastern slope to the supply of brushwood.

In the evening the commandant went to the Japanese. The "fishermen" were occupied with a curious game. Standing in a circle around the placid skipper, each in turn drew a straw from a bunch in his fist. The longest was drawn by the bosun. At sight of Kositsyn the skipper moved aside and began to clean his nails with a bit of wood.

"We choose cook," he explained pleasantly. "This man cook for us today."

Kositsyn looked at the men who had been drawing lots. The huskies stood in a semicircle, hissing and bowing with studied friendliness. The puny radioman even saluted him. The bosun regained his self-possession, looked sidewise and slowly opened his big mouth.

They were clearly up to some foul play. Just what, Kositsyn could not guess. Deep in thought, he made the rounds of the Japanese camp. The mats, the pot, the barrel, the rubber boots: everything was just as it had been in the morning. But the boat was considerably closer to the water. Was the tide the explanation? And why was the broken oar tied up with twine? The commandant knew some twenty Japanese words, but their quick jabber sounded like a nonsense-jingle. He could catch only the familiar sound, *sadi-des*. Were they planning to take off?

After a moment's thought he pulled both oars, on which clothes were drying, out of the sand and took them up the hill. The cook ran ahead and asked anxiously:

"Hey, Ivan, why take?"

"They should be shorter. Much too big for spoons," retorted Kositsyn grimly.

IV

Night fell, spacious and starry. The bonfire on the hill was dying down, and the skipper gave the command to start.

As we discovered later, the "fishermen" had kept two knives and a flat bayonet which the bosun had managed to secrete in a cod's belly during our search. At first they had decided not to resort to arms but to wait for the police schooner which had taken the message from the *Kobe-Maru* the day before. Then two of the "fishermen" (the dinghy wouldn't hold any more) undertook to make their way to the nearest island of the Kuril group and apply for help. But the oars were up on the hill at the commandant's post. Nothing remained for them but to wait until sleep came to the assistance of their knives. And sleep came. They could see the hungry fire pale and droop to the grass. Soon the commandant himself ceased stirring.

To avoid making any noise the Japanese left their sandals and their rubber boots down below. Faithful to their tactics of encirclement, they separated into two groups

and cautiously ascended the hill. The bosun, who had drawn the longest straw the evening before, was to attack first.

The bonfire was out. The man was asleep. The commandant's rounded back was silhouetted against the starry sky. His cap had fallen down over his nose and his head was drooping to his knees.

The bosun rushed up to the sleeping man and quickly plunged his knife into his back. Once! Twice!

He pushed Kositsyn into the grass and the "fishermen" who had run up out of the dark began to maul the commandant with uncontrolled fury.

The skipper was the first to come to himself.

"*Sa-a*, that's how!" he cried.

The others also stopped. And then the "fishermen" heard Kositsyn's familiar, husky voice:

"Now, what's all this, a-ah?" he drawled. "Killed a sleeping man? You happy?"

He stepped out from behind the bushes and threw the dummy onto the coals, first removing his monkey jacket from it. The roll of seaweed burst into flame and illumined the glum faces of the Japanese.

"Give me the knife," Kositsyn said to the murderer. "So that's what you call being a cook?"

He wanted to say something more biting about Samurai villainy, but he couldn't find the right words immediately; by the time he found them, stones were clattering down the slope at the heels of the Japanese.

The rest of the night Kositsyn spent in the wet grass, only getting up occasionally to feed the fire.

By morning the commandant's arm was blue from pinches. He took a cold rub down in the icy water and again set to work. He found the strength to lay in a supply of brushwood, wash his jersey and even to polish his buckle and tarnished buttons with a bit of pumice stone. He was the commandant, the master of Bird Island, and every time he passed the silent, hostile crowd of Japanese he forced himself to raise his weary eyelids and plant his heels firmly on the ground.

But the sand was temptingly warm. The dry, springy seaweed clutched at his feet, inviting him to lie down and rest. So insistent was the call that Kositsyn began to avoid this dangerous spot, choosing rather the large, uneven rocks.

At dinnertime he again set out to look for eggs. Now all the nests were empty, but on the sand near the fishermen lay a whole pile of eggs.

Such impudence roused Kositsyn's ire. He went up to his neighbours resolved to make them divide the lot. But he had hardly come up to the mats when two "fishermen" jumped straight onto the heap of eggs. Filled with a lust for revenge, they started a ridiculous war dance among the shells.

Drive them away? Scare them for form's sake? No matter how hungry the commandant was, he didn't want to start using his revolver.

Kositsyn simply didn't notice the two dancers. He straightened up and passed the Japanese with the leisurely gait of a man who has just dined.

The ruse of the famished man must have been obvious, for the skipper snorted. This angered Kositsyn. He slowed his pace and said firmly to the skipper:

"Your cook is much better at poking into other people's pots. I'm afraid he may choke on some lead peas."

Hunger again brought Kositsyn to the bird colony. Throwing off his monkey jacket, he began to rummage about in the holes hollowed out by the birds in the sandy slope. The puffins had beaks of iron and they defended themselves desperately. Kositsyn twisted the heads of two puffins and roasted them on the red-hot coals. The dark meat was bitter and smelled of fish.

What followed is hazy in his memory. Kositsyn sat at his bonfire, his eyes wide open. He saw nothing but the fire and the Japanese stirring on the sand. The rocks swam before him and multiplied; the waves, for some reason, rushed up to the grass; the sun rumbled like a huge blowtorch. The seagulls screeched monotonously: a fi-as-co! a fi-as-co!

V

It was a quiet and lovely evening when Kositsyn descended the hill and sat down opposite the Japanese. Exhausted by the constant nervous tension, the commandant wanted to look the enemy in the face.

"Go to sleep, *anata,*" he said in a tired voice. "Go to sleep, do you hear? . . ."

It was strange that not a single "fisherman" raised any objections. It was as if the entire crew had tacitly admitted that opposition was useless. Sleep? Then sleep it is!

The sun dropped down into the quiet, shimmering sea. A duck hid its head under its wing. The smoke over the island rested on a thin, spindly leg, jutting its crown into a green sky. Through the quiet came the murmur of the waves as they lapped against the pleated sands.

Seven "fishermen" lay on their mats, stretching and yawning deliciously. It was enough for one of them to open his mouth for the yawn to make the rounds of the entire crew and infect Kositsyn. They soon noticed this and began openly to mock the commandant. First one then another distorted his mouth in a sign of extreme exhaustion. From all sides came deep, contented sighs, the sounds of joints snapping into place, the smacking of lips, grunting, and sleepy murmurs—the dark music of drowziness capable of felling even a man fresh from sleep.

To shake it off Kositsyn went down to the shore, kneeled, and plunged his head into the dark water.

This refreshed him a bit. He wet his cap and clapped it down on his head. If only he could last till morning, and then. . . . The *Smyeli* must, after all, notice his fire!

He returned to the Japanese. Now they seemed to be really asleep: the snores and sighs appeared genuine.

Kositsyn once again counted the "fishermen." Seven Japanese lay in a semicircle, heads toward the hill, feet toward the fire. The fire, too, was dozing, its coals covering with a carpet of grey ashes.

Cold water dripped from the ribbons of his cap down his back. The commandant did not even stir. Let it drip—better so. His hand was numb from his pinches, and the drops did, after all, drive sleep away.

A bird screeched. A mosquito began to drone tediously near his ear. Lower, lower it droned and rang.... If only dawn came soon, then he'd go for birds' eggs. In the wind his lids were not so inclined to close. He brushed away the mosquito. It was hesitating, poised for a bite.... If only it would bite! Not a mosquito but a telegraph wire in the steppes.... How did the steppes get there? Nonsense! The wind? No, it was a song—a a strange song.

He gazed at the coals, trying to make out whether it was a man singing or simply the ringing in his tired head. And through the lazy lapping of the sea clearly came the song—sad and simple.

He jumped up and moved away. The song followed him, went alongside, enfolded him in a phantom embrace.

It was bending him, making him reel, putting him to sleep.... What the devil! The stars were dipping and the shore rolling just like the deck of a ship. Was he imagining it all?

The commandant grew chilly. He moved faster, almost running. The song died down, lagged behind....

Out of the darkness a cliff rushed up to meet him. He ran into its wet side. The blood was throbbing painfully in the scratch on his shoulder. Should he wash it with salt water? Tomorrow the doctor would bandage it properly. What was that? Like a noose round his neck.

Again Kositsyn sensed the stealthy approach of the song. It had crawled up from somewhere in the dark, out of the damp seaweed, out of the stones, and, embracing him, was putting a gentle hand over his eyes.

Crouching, he muttered through his teeth, repeating over and over again:

"I don't want to sleep. I don't want to sleep. I don't...."

But the song was stronger than he. Gently it bent his feverish head to his knees. Sleep! Sleep! Nothing else mattered.

He straightened up and looked despairingly into the gloom. The commandant seemed to see the skipper sitting on a stone opposite the cliff. The skipper had his elbows propped on his knees and his chin cupped in his palms. His face was motionless but watchful eyes were smouldering under his lashes.

So that's what it was! The song was coming from between his teeth.

And all at once the commandant understood: he was weaving a spell of sleep. Another minute and the song

would lead him, step by step, into oblivion. Like a bull! Damn them!

He jumped up, shouting as loud as he could:

"You won't get me! Nothing doing! Shut up!"

The song stopped. He could hear the indolent splashing of the sea.

"Good," said the skipper. "I no sing." He linked his arms around his knees and added dreamily, narrowing his eyes: "Excuse.... I thought to please you. Siberians like beautiful songs."

"I'm not a Siberian. Shut up!"

"Excuse me, but who? Most like from Volga? Volga songs also nice."

Kositsyn reeled away from the danger spot. Now at least he could look the enemy in the face. The black fear born of the song gave way to the ordinary anger of a tired and hungry man.

"I'll do the questioning," said Kositsyn glumly. "You're not quacking in your own bog."

They were silent.

"Yes.... Ah, so," said the skipper breathlessly. "Well, you know rule: he laugh who strong?"

"That's why I'm laughing."

"Who you? Commander? No! Master? No! Simple sailor. We all Robinsons in same fix."

"And I think there are no Robinsons here," said Kositsyn reflectively, "nothing but rascals. And I am your commandant here. Is that clear?"

Making an effort he moved away from the skipper. Then he turned and added bitterly:

"Don't sing Volga songs. I'm afraid—the fish'll peg out."

VI

The cry of the Japanese roused the commandant from his doze. The excited "fishermen" were crowded on the beach near the water's edge, shouting greetings to a white schooner. The radioman, screeching above the rest, tore off his yellow jacket and waved it over his head, although the schooner had already caught sight of the group. The boat was no more than ten cable lengths away.

She was heading directly for the island, and the Japanese outdid one another in their attempt to make Kositsyn understand what a sad end awaited him. The bosun was most vivid in his explanations, for his vanity had been greatly piqued by the commandant. Standing on tiptoe he moved his hand around his short neck and stuck out his tongue as if to say, "well, you've gotten as far as the hempen necktie."

The skipper hastened to explain most graciously:

"This our. This imperial boat. Soon you take complete rest, Mr.—Commandant."

"I see," said Kositsyn morosely.

He silently took out his revolver and looked into the cylinder, counting anxiously:

"Seven for seven. Just right."

Then he looked again at the ship and turned away from the sea.

The commandant had no need for field-glasses. She was the well-known *Kairi-Maru*, a blue-white, elongated schooner with superstructures on the very stern, giving her the look of a refrigerator ship. Officially she belonged to the Ministry of Lands and Forests, but she was sent on various delicate commissions which could be described only by referring to the criminal code. As soon as we detained a crab boat or a couple of pirate schooners in our waters the *Kairi-Maru* made her appearance, though keeping at a respectable distance, and entered into lengthy conversations full of hints and transparent threats. More than once we had met her near the seaplane base, the new wharfs or the sea otter rookery, and Sachkov, enraged, had promised to give up one eye if only he could see "that ox on a rope" with the other. He gained nothing by losing his temper. Both his eyes were in perfect condition, and the audacious *Kairi-Maru* had now been cruising for almost three years along the Kamchatka coast, signalling by night to the concessionaires' canneries.

This was the end. Kositsyn turned and went along the shore, trying to determine just where the schooner would land her party.

It is hard to say what he was banking on. He himself did not know. The heavy holster slapped against his thigh in a friendly, if awkward, manner, as though desiring to cheer him up for the last time.

At Kositsyn's heels came the "fishermen." They were tired of waiting for the commandant to collapse. The nearness of the *Kairi-Maru* and the hissing of the skipper strengthened their resolution to put an end to Kositsyn before the schooner sent a party ashore.

Had Sachkov or Gutorov been in the commandant's position, the climax would have been reached much sooner. It's difficult to keep your bullets—and your head—when your finger is just itching to pull the trigger. But Kositsyn was patient enough not to rush things.

He quickened his step, and so did the "fishermen." Persistent, light on their feet, they uttered not a word. All that could be heard was the crunch of the pebbles and the screech of the seagulls following the men.

Silently they crossed the brittle heap of brushwood, climbed over some rocks, and following Kositsyn to the sea, went along the wet, firm strip of sand.

He turned and said in a tired voice:

"Hey, *anata*! I need no escort."

The skipper drew his breath in a whistle and answered, respectfully:

"It is farewell stroll, Mr. Commandant!"

They moved on. It was a strange promenade. In front went the tall, slightly stooped sailor with a grim and sleepy face; behind him, seven high-handed, angry "fishermen" in coarse blue suits and gaudy jerseys. When the commandant moved, the "fishermen" moved; when the commandant stopped, the Japanese stopped.

They rounded a bend and came out on the northwestern shore, the only convenient landing place. The small cove which the coast guards subsequently named Kositsyn Cove, bends here in the form of a horseshoe. Its steep slopes offer excellent protection against the wind.

Here Kositsyn noticed two long shadows ahead of him. The radioman and the bosun had run on ahead and now stood in the commandant's path. The others were closing in from the left, and all together formed a trap opening in the direction of the sea.

The skipper shouted some brief words in his own tongue. Kositsyn immediately understood: death would not come easy. The radioman held a monkey wrench. The bosun was waving a tiller. The rest held sticks and stones in readiness.

The Japanese moved along in a semicircle. Behind them, on the bare summit, the fire still flickered. The smoke stood like a tree with a thick trunk, and its bushy crown threw a shadow on the sand.

It was awkward shooting at close range. The commandant took a step back into the water and raised his revolver. Strangely enough, Kositsyn felt a sense of relief. The feeling of alarm and of being constantly on guard which had not left him the past three days vanished completely. He no longer even felt sleepy.

He planted his feet firmly and saw plainly that anger and fear were at war in the Japanese. The bosun was walking, his head lowered like a bull, looking into the water.

The skipper had his eyes closed. The radioman moved sidewise. All of them were afraid, for the first choice belonged to the commandant. Until the first shot was fired he was stronger than everyone singly, and stronger than all of them together. Yet they continued to advance.

Seven for seven. Well, so be it!

"What are you cringing for?" he cried to the bosun. "Look straight! Look at me!"

He took a firmer footing on the slippery stones and fired at the end man. The bosun fell. The rest rushed forward. Stones struck the commandant on the elbow and chest at the same time, spoiling his aim.

"Well now, who's next?"

Aiming at the skipper he waited for a blow, a leap. But the "fishermen" unexpectedly stopped dead. Only the skipper, grey with anger and fear, frowning, tense, still advanced, squinting.

A siren was wailing in the sea.

Craning their necks, the "fishermen" looked over the commandant's head at the schooner, and their faces grew blacker with every second. Someone dropped a stone into the water. "*Sa-a,*" said the dumbfounded radioman. The skipper cautiously opened one eye, hissed, and unclenched his fists.

Kositsyn could not turn around: the "fishermen" were two steps away. He looked at the Japanese, trying to guess what had happened on the schooner, and understood only one thing: he had no time to lose.



He straightened his cap, lowered his revolver and walked out of the water toward the enemy.

The radioman was the first to draw back; after him went the others. The "fishermen" walked faster and faster away from the sea. Then they began to run.

Once on the beach, the commandant turned around. The *Kairi-Maru* was being convoyed by a coast guard cutter, until then concealed by her high sides. Now the schooner was slowly tacking, revealing a small grey cutter, its green flag, and sailors jumping into a boat.

... Leaping ashore, we rushed to Kositsyn.

We saw him raise his hand in an invitation to the Japanese to line up, saw him put the little skipper on the left flank. Then Kositsyn took three steps back, inspected his "fishermen" critically, and with the command: "'Ten—shun!" started toward the boat.

His monkey jacket buttoned carefully, he walked staidly to meet us—gaunt and overgrown with a coppery brush.

The commandant's eyes were closed. He was asleep on his feet.

1939



ABOVE ALL—DON'T LOSE YOUR TEMPER

I

LIFE ashore is simpler than at sea. There is less fogginess, less danger of running aground, and, most important, none of those irritating conventions a ship has to contend with.

At any rate, the sea is not nearly so spacious as one would think, watching a ship's smoke from shore.

Here is an example.

Within the three-mile limit everything is called by its real name. A thief is a thief, the law is the law, and a bullet—a bullet. Near the coast it is we who give the orders: "Stop the engine! Catch the rope!" But a pirate ship need only get beyond the forbidden zone for the thief to become Mr. Fisherman and the stolen plaice, sanctified private property.

What follows comes already within the realm of diplomacy: memorandums, pacts and notes. I, myself, would not resort to paper at all. When dealing with Mr. Rascalito or Mr. Fish-Thiefado it's far better to look at politics through the slit of a gun sight.

... In a word, the *Osaka-Maru* was anchored exactly four miles off the coast. We could admire the black masts and the blue trademark on the ship's funnel only at a distance. She was a sizable tub with a displacement of about eight thousand tons, roomy quarters for processing crabs, deep holds and a vast number of winches and cranes hanging in readiness over the sides. This was a complete crab cannery, smoky and noisy, with no less than five hundred fishermen and workers living on it.

Near the *Osaka-Maru* and barely reaching her bridge, lay the feeder. She had just unloaded coal and was now taking on canned goods from the mother ship.

Koloskov brightened at sight of the boat as if she were an old acquaintance.

"Just in time for dinner," he said, winking. "It'll be their crabs and our dessert."

We really were old acquaintances. Every spring, between the 15th and 20th of April, the crab ship made her appearance in the Sea of Okhotsk and dropped anchor at a respectful distance from shore. She plundered the western coast of Kamchatka in a tireless, diligent, businesslike way, resorting every year to one and the same method.

In the evening, if there was no coast guard cutter in sight, the *Osaka-Maru* dropped a whole flotilla of *kavasaki* and rowboats down both her sides. About a hundred fast little fishing boats streaked toward the shore like a horde of mosquitoes to straddle shoals of crabs and drop nets with large glass floats attached. At dawn the flotilla picked up its catch—thousands of crabs with their prickly coat of mail and claws caught in the nets. This was thieving on the conveyor system, straight from the underwater rocks to the boiling cauldrons on board. And while this plunderous small fry seethed near shore, their huge master stood calmly smoking in the distance.

Naturally there was always a lookout in the crow's nest.

No sooner did the tip of the *Smyeli's* mast sail into view than the *Osaka-Maru* sounded the alarm and the boats turned their bows to the open sea like the needle of a compass swings to the North.

It was an interesting sight: the bobbing whitecaps, the chugging engines, the cries of the skippers as they hurried their men. The crabs went flying on board, and smoke curled over the engines as they throbbed out "All's o-ver! All's o-ver!" Those who couldn't pull up their nets, cut the tackle, not forgetting, however, to mark the spot by a board or a mat.

The *kavasaki* raced forward in a broken line that contracted as it approached the ship. Behind them, in tow, came the flat-bottomed, empty sampans, and still farther

back, bringing up the rear of the mosquito flotilla, jerked the rowboats with their half-naked fishermen yelling in reckless abandon.

We made for two *kavasaki*. One cut her towlines and managed to get beyond the three-mile limit, but we got the other.

The skipper, livid with vexation and anger, was little inclined to talk. When he saw the other *kavasaki* turn her stern on us he rushed to meet our boarding group with an iron tiller and undoubtedly would have sent someone to follow the crabs had not our coolheaded bosun gripped his holster.

After that everything took its usual course. The skipper dropped the tiller and the crew began to bow and hiss. We searched the *kavasaki* and in the bow hold found a wet net with some twenty crabs crawling about in it. That was quite enough to make the floating cannery criminally liable, and the *Smyeli* immediately headed for the *Osaka-Maru*.

In the meantime the mosquitoes had managed to get beyond the three-mile limit. A low cloud of black smoke near the shore was the only sign left of the crab flotilla; in the distance, surrounded by boats like a hen by her chicks, loomed the iron hulk of the mother ship.

We approached the *Osaka-Maru*, and, in accordance with international law, signalled: "Drop a ladder." No one stirred, although many fishermen and sailors were on

deck. No fewer than fifty huskies, still panting from the race, looked down with curiosity at the cutter.

Up above, at the edge of the bridge, stood the captain of the crab ship, an arrogant, shrivelled old man with prominent ears and a flat nose. He didn't even think it necessary to put on his jacket; holding his flowered kimono together over his chest, he yawned demonstratively into his palm.

"What do you want?" he asked in English, leaning over the railing.

"Drop the ladder. We have detained your motor boat."

"I cannot understand you," he said.

That was the usual dodge. If we had spoken English he would have answered in Japanese, Mexican, Malayan—in any old language, only to play for time.

Of the entire *Smyeli* crew only Sachkov knew a few English words. The lieutenant called him out of the engine room to tell the captain to drop a ladder and stop playing the fool.

Our Sachkov was a fine fellow! He could squeeze ninety h.p. out of sixty, but he simply could not construct an English sentence.

Sachkov buttoned his monkey jacket, took up the megaphone and cried out, relying more on his vocal chords than on grammar:

"Allo! Hey, you, *anata*! Give me *trap*! Allo! Do you speak?" Then, reverting to Russian, he said: "I say, drop

the ladder! Do you understand? Well now.... The *trap*. What the devil! Allo!"

His voice grew in volume as he continued, and the captain, who at first had listened rather attentively, began to yawn and finally turned away altogether.

"What a fool!" said Sachkov angrily. "Give the order to remove the cover from the machine gun. He'll understand that!"

"There's no sense to it," said Koloskov. "If you take it off, you've got to use the gun."

"May I continue then?"

"Only not like that."

Two signals were raised on the *Smyeli*. The first: "Drop the ladder. Your boats have violated the coast of the U.S.S.R.," and then a second: "Answer. Will be compelled to take resolute measures." Only then did the captain send for a fat man in a felt hat (the interpreter, it appeared) and start speaking, pointing first to the deck and then to the shore.

"The captain objects!" declared the fat man. "The captain is quite far enough away from the shore."

"Your *kavasaki* penetrated the forbidden zone."

"The captain has no knowledge of this."

"You have been fishing illegally."

"Excuse me. The captain does not understand you."

"He'll understand soon enough, if he wants to," replied Koloskov quietly. "Tell him that we have arrested the *kavasaki*. Sign the paper on our findings."

The captain smiled and shook his head, and the fat fellow, without waiting to hear the answer, cried into the megaphone:

"The captain denies it. The captain does not know this boat."

There was a roar of laughter on deck. The fishermen, delighted by the captain's resourcefulness, drummed on the iron deck with their wooden sandals, yelling and calling their friends in the *kavasaki* by name.

"What do you mean it's not yours?!" said Sachkov indignantly. "Comrade Lieutenant, may I show them the trademark?"

He started pulling the *kavasaki* up to show the name on the life belt, but Koloskov said quietly:

"Drop it. It doesn't matter. This zone isn't ours. Ahead, in low!"

We moved silently away from the high sides. A sudden burst of wind made the Japanese ship list heavily and carried over to us the shouts and derisive laughter of her men. The winch at the bow rattled as the *Osaka-Maru* loosened her chain to settle the anchor more firmly.

Koloskov looked away from the crab ship to the shore. The haze which usually covers the summits of the island hills had vanished. Their distant blue-white cones were clearly visible—a sure sign of an approaching storm.

"It's certainly blowing!" said Koloskov absently. "Probably blow up to an eight-force wind. What do you think?"

"We'll make it," answered the bosun quietly.

"And what if we dropped anchor?"

"She'd slip. The bottom is vile here."

"Precisely.... At midnight. Get boarding groups ready."

Gutorov still did not understand.

"One?"

"No, three. Everyone free from duty can rest. Take away the dominoes so they'll go to sleep."

Resting his chin against his damp collar, Koloskov grew sombre again. He did not even notice that the seagulls, screeching anxiously, were deserting the sullen sea for the shelter of distant coves.

II

At six that evening the engine room hatch of the *kavasaki* was blown off. The engine spluttered, the pump died out, and the *Smyeli* had to take her in tow.

The squat little tub dragged and pulled at the towline like a restive horse, and the three Japanese were barely able to bail her out fast enough with pitchers and a donkey engine.

The tow immediately cut down our speed. It's easier to swim a hundred metres in boots and a monkey jacket than to tow a *kavasaki* in stormy weather. We crept along like oxen, like a barge, like time in a hospital, as the wind whipped up the Sea of Okhotsk and tore at the dinghy tarpaulins.

It was already quite dark when we turned the *kavasaki* over to the naval station near the Olovyannaya River. We were tired and chilled to the bone. Our raincoats, monkey jackets and even jerseys were soaking wet. At supper only Shirokikh, sighing out of sympathy for our state of exhaustion, asked for an additional tin. All the rest turned down the cold pork and beans.

"Blowing eight for sure," the cook said dejectedly as he cleared the table.

...The sea grew deserted before our very eyes. The ships which had been taking on the spring herring catch stopped loading and left to lie to during the storm. Rowboats raced one another to the canneries. Storm signals dangled atop all the masts, and the reckless Kamchatka *kuriban*, standing up to their necks in water, were trying to hold fast the *kungasi*.

We were to spend the whole night at sea, for the western coast of Kamchatka, over a stretch of hundreds of kilometres, has neither bays nor convenient coves where we could lie to. The treeless coast fringed with pebbled beaches was strewn with the wrecks of schooners and the bones of whales.

But Koloskov had other plans in mind. Extinguishing our navigation lights, we again turned south and soon saw the lights of ships. The hull of the *Osaka-Maru* partly concealed the feeder, which gave us the impression of a boat of unusual length. The only light, a lantern in an iron cage swinging on a mast, lit up now the winch drums,

now the figures of sailors. The ship was taking on board the last *kungasi* of her huge flotilla.

The darkness reduces distance, and that is probably why it seemed to me that the boats had drawn much closer to the shore.

I said as much to Koloskov.

"That's right," he said approvingly. "Saved the collar and left the mare to burn."

He went on to explain:

"They can't take the flotilla on board while in motion, so they decided to creep up closer to shore. The bottom is firmer there and the cape conceals them."

"That means?"

"Only take your time," said Koloskov. "We'll find our bearings first."

We crept closer to the floating cannery, and while the radioman took the bearings, the lieutenant explained to the boarding party just what was expected of them. Only a permanent watch was to remain on the cutter. The rest of our crew was to board the ship, take over the wheel, set up strategic posts and then await further instructions to be signalled from the *Smyeli*—at night by lanterns and in the daytime—by flags.

We were to capture a whole cannery with some five hundred fishermen and sailors, all aroused by the arrest of their *kavasaki* and undoubtedly feeling quite safe on board ship. There had been previous attempts to arrest crab ships, but they had all ended one-sidedly with the

trial of some skipper or other and a protracted exchange of diplomatic notes. This was not a simple operation even in daytime. Darkness considerably complicated the task.

First we decided to come up to the crab ship and board her from the lee side, up the hang ladders the fishermen had used.

"Don't reach for your guns unless it's absolutely necessary," said Koloskov. "Keep facing them. Remember that the Japanese always attack from behind. And above all—don't lose your temper. A bullet isn't a nail—you can't pull it out with pincers."

III

Koloskov was right: the wind proved our ally. The crab ship could put out to sea only after she had taken the flotilla on board, and to do that with strong waves and a squally south wind against her was not easy even for the most experienced sailors. The rowboats lay close to the weather side; the chains rattled and broke, and the boats that were raised before the others kept swinging in the air, tearing the guys out of the sailors' hands. Two large five-ton *kungasi* were wrecked right before our eyes. One crashed into the board of the *Osaka-Maru* and sank; the other, raised to deck level, slipped off the hook and crashed into the water from a height of ten metres.

We approached the *Osaka-Maru* from the weather side,

which lay in absolute darkness. The boat was listing so heavily in the squall that the red lead bottom was exposed. The screw churned the water slowly: evidently the captain did not depend on the anchor and was using the engine to keep the *Osaka-Maru* in place.

When we ranged up alongside, the crab ship had already taken the last of the fishermen on board, and the hang ladders had been raised.

The lieutenant then ordered us to jump for it. The waves would heave us up so high that the whole deck of the crab ship became visible, and then drop us so low that all we saw was a blank, high wall, like that of a fortress.

All our fenders were hung out along the mooring girder and six sailors kept pushing the *Smyeli* away from the crab ship with their oars and guage rods. Yet our cutter creaked and trembled so at times that even Shirokikh felt uneasy.

Finally the bosun managed to throw a noose over.

Up we jumped, hitting the side with our shoulders, and the sea came flying after us. Then Gutorov and I turned to drag Kositsyn, panting and wet, onto the deck of the *Osaka-Maru*. Zimin and Shirokikh were the last to come. The *Smyeli*, but a nutshell beside the *Osaka-Maru*, was bouncing about far below.

"Watch for the semaphore!" shouted Koloskov. "Don't heave up the anch. . . ."

That was all we heard. The cutter flew off somewhere to the side. A wave thundered and showered us with spray. We ran up to the bridge to take over the radio room and the wheel.

Everything went so fast we didn't even have a chance to catch our breath. When the captain climbed up on the bridge, it was all over. Shirokikh had sealed the doors of the radio room, and Kositsyn's voice could be heard in the tube as he took charge of the engine room. He informed us that the chief engineer was acting up a bit owing to the novelty of the situation, but that otherwise everything was under control. There was enough steam and the stokers were at their posts.

The captain scurried from side to side, waiting for us to finish talking. It was hard to recognize the old man. He had put on a black jacket with epaulettes. The two belts crossed on his breast and large cap perched rakishly on his head gave him a redoubtable appearance.

"What do you want here?" asked our bosun, plugging the tube with a cork.

The captain was frightened but furious. He opened the pilot's desk, and, muttering, began tracing a long fingernail across the map. According to him the *Osaka-Maru* was lying some ten miles from shore.

"The captain considers the behaviour of the coast guards a mistake," explained the interpreter.

"Go on, go on," said Gutorov, bored. "We know all that."

"The captain warns you of grave consequences."

"Thanks. Such as, for instance?"

"The captain orders you to leave the ship."

"Well, now, listen to me," said Gutorov angrily. "I do the ordering here. *Yukinasai* into the orlop. There now, get back. We'll sign it without your assistance."

The crab ship was asleep when we descended into the cannery quarters. With no portholes and with its iron pillars in the centre, the low iron hall seemed endless. Rubber belts with cans on them stretched from the vats to the automatic machines. In the distance loomed the autoclaves, still hot and looking like field kitchens.

Wherever we went we found traces of a catch but recently handled: crab shells gleaming in the gutters; the sharp, slightly bitter smell of raw crab meat rising from the darkness; damp coveralls hanging on poles in the drying room.

The interpreter followed at our heels, mumbling something. But we needed no explanations: thousands of half-pound tins, ready for shipment, lay in the storeroom.

Shirokikh took up a tin and began to examine the label. A fiery red crab was clambering up a snowy hill, holding in its claws a medallion with the firm's name. Below was written: "Made in Japan."

Seeing Shirokikh's difficulty in deciphering the unfamiliar inscription, the interpreter said helpfully:

"It was made in Japan."

"Stolen in the U.S.S.R.," corrected Gutorov dryly.

"Excuse me—no understand—what?"

"The judge will explain it to you."

A warm, nauseating stench filtered up into the shop from the holds. And the farther we moved from the freshly-washed, iron cannery proper, the more obtrusive became the smell.

Two roofed gangways paved with wooden grating connected the cannery with the stern holds. The gangway on the right corridor led to a sliding iron door. Gutorov pushed it aside, and a stale, sickening stench hit us.

We were standing at the edge of the stern hold used as quarters for the fishermen. Four galleries belted the deep well; vaguely outlined down below were barrels and cases.

The men were sleeping side by side on planks, covered with motley rags. We could see gaping mouths, limp hands, naked torsos shining with sweat. They were all fast asleep. Not even the roar of the ventilators or the heavy blows of the waves, which made the monster cannery rumble, could rouse the fishermen. Evidently the owners were economizing on lights, for only two carbide lanterns blinked in the distance, at the very bottom of the ship. The tiers filled with snores and mutterings and the humid warmth of hundreds of bodies; the barrels in the depth of the hold; the dim lights; the rags on the poles—all rocked like a giant iron cradle as the storm whistled and howled.

We returned to the bridge and began to watch for semaphore signals from the *Smyeli.* The wind had turned the *Osaka-Maru* stern shoreward, and the sea rushed past us noisily. Whitecaps swished around on deck, and the spray drummed like little pebbles on the canvas cover of the compass.

Five cable lengths away to starboard lay the low hulk of the feeder. On the portside the lights of fisheries and canneries stretched along the coast far to the north. Red lights anxiously blinked on poles near the mooring points—warnings to cutters and *kungasi* to keep away. No matter how we tried we could not make out the navigation lights of the *Smyeli.* The cutter had evidently taken shelter from the wind under the ship's side.

"I wonder when they get up here," asked Gutorov.

"Probably at six," I answered. "What difference does it make to us?"

"They'll howl. And perhaps even worse, if they're given alcohol. They're a wild, crazy lot."

"Suppose we lock them up?"

"Impossible—the latrine is aft."

I shared the bosun's fears. It's one thing to hook a roach and quite another to have the line strain and tear under the weight of a sixteen-pound sheatfish. The *Smyeli* had never detained a crab ship before. A whole settlement—half a thousand hungry men irritated by the ship's roll and the tedious work—dozed in the depths of the

Osaka-Maru, ready to appear on deck at the first blast of the whistle.

Shirokikh alone did not seem uneasy. He stood at the wheel and slowly chewed on a crust of bread. I suppose he wouldn't be the least taken aback even if he landed in the roundhouse of a Japanese cruiser.

"We'll make them understand," he said quietly.

IV

At dawn the *Smyeli* came up. Diving into the water like a teal, she flagged out, at a distance of half a cable length: "Raise anchor. Follow me. In case of fog hold to South 170°. Abreast Cape Sorochy meet *Sobol.* Be careful with crew."

The bosun of the *Osaka-Maru* called some sailors rather unwillingly. The five fellows wore white gloves and moved as if buttermilk flowed in their veins. The bosun yawned and the sailors scratched. Every five minutes the chain would stop, and the man at the winch, clicking his tongue, would fumble with the piston. All this dawdling infuriated Gutorov. At last the anchor came up and our bosun ordered "Forward in low!"

...Two hours later we came abreast of Cape Sorochy. The storm died down just as suddenly as it had arisen. All the whitecaps vanished. The whistling, hooting and mad laughter of the wind, the creaking of the beams, and the slapping of taut sails against iron began to lessen; soon the wild jazz faded to a whisper. The birches on

the hills straightened their branches, and the hungry puffins and seagulls boldly left the coves for the open sea—these were excellent signs.

Near Cape Sorochy the cutter *Sobol* joined our caravan. Now we could reinforce our group. Three sailors were put on the feeder and five on the *Osaka-Maru*. Koloskov also sent to the crab ship our cook, who acted as medical orderly during operations. To tell the truth, we didn't expect much help from Kostya Skvortsov. He was an inoffensive little fellow who could talk on and on, like an alarm clock without a stop catch. He would buttonhole anyone around and talk with the same passion about the stars, colds, Chamberlain's policy or worms in dogs. He was chock-full of sundry bits of information and babbled even in his sleep.

"Some tub!" he yelled, scrambling aboard the *Osaka-Maru*. "Where's the captain? Keeping quiet? Well, naturally. Knows what's what. The lieutenant was afraid of trouble with the fishermen.... How many are there? A thousand? Ah? I think no less. Kositsyn in the engine room? Heaving, of course! Poor fellow!..."

Noticing a heavy bag in the cook's hands, Shirokikh livened up at once.

"So you managed to grab something?"

"For you? Naturally," answered Kostya proudly.

He opened the bag and showed us a roll of bandage, a bottle of iodine and a thick rubber tourniquet.

"Eat it yourself," said Shirokikh, offended.

Fortunately Skvortsov's hands worked just as well as his tongue. He soon located the caboose, evicted the Japanese cook and set to work.

V

Our caravan stretched for some five miles. First came the *Smyeli,* shaking water off her deck like a duck. Behind crawled the ships, looking like black flatirons, and the gleaming wake of the *Sobol* brought up the rear.

The fog which had accompanied us from Olovyannaya turned into rain. Tiny iridescent crystals of sleet settled on the deck and the boat covers, and made our canvas raincoats as stiff as boards. On the portside stretched the level western coast of Kamchatka with its thin, black factory chimneys and tar-papered roofs. To starboard, as far as the eye could see, rain-pitted waves rolled lazily.

We were moving past the most densely populated section of Kamchatka. The storm had died down and thousands of boats were hurrying out to sea, to the seines heavy with herring. Some came so close that we could plainly see the fishermen waving to us in greeting.

The helmsman of one of the *kavasaki,* evidently a former navy man, dropped his tiller and signalled:

"Congratulate you on rich catch."

The catch was indeed rich. For the first time we were

bringing to headquarters not a little thieving *kavasaki* or a fishing schooner, but a huge floating cannery which could hold a hundred cutters like the *Smyeli* and the *Sobol*.

The wet deck of the *Osaka-Maru* remained empty. The Japanese had evidently reconciled themselves to their arrest and decided not to complicate matters; only a sailor and the second mate—both in yellow sou'-westers and rubber boots—continued their promenade along the starboard deck, looking now at the cutter, now at the white summit of Shimushu Island, vaguely outlined behind the curtain of rain. What were they looking for? Were they hoping to meet a Japanese ship, a *kavasaki*, or the police schooner generally cruising off the coast of Kamchatka? Or were they simply keeping an eye on us? Every half hour the sailor went up to the noonbell attached to the foremast and beat the time.

The officer and sailor did not exchange a single word throughout their watch. Both acted as if nothing unusual had happened on board ship. The officer yawned, the sailor shook the water off the tarpaulins and fixed the boat covers.

The indifference of the Japanese, the noise of the screw and the even gong of the bell all bespoke the calm, well-regulated life of a big ship which nothing could disturb. Each time, as if in answer to the *Osaka-Maru*, the crystal-clear ring of our cutter's noonbell reached us.

... It was six in the morning when we finally ap-

proached Cape Lopatka and began to round the low, stony tongue of land which separates the Sea of Okhotsk from the Pacific Ocean.

Through the noise of the sea and the rain came the monotonous wail of a siren. The shore was but poorly visible and I began to turn the *Osaka-Maru* away from the reefs to avoid splintering the tub.

Just then Shirokikh nudged me.

To starboard two Japanese destroyers were heading right across our path. They appeared suddenly from behind Shimushu Island, where they evidently had been lying in wait for us after receiving a call from the crab ship. Now they were flying toward us at full speed, like wolfhounds racing through a ploughed field.

As soon as the warships appeared, the fishermen began to pack the deck of the *Osaka-Maru*. I had never thought the crab ship could hold so many men. They crawled out of the holds, out of the deckhouses, from the spar deck, out of all the chinks and crevices—and soon the whole deck was crowded from the messroom to the bow capstan. Those in front waved kerchiefs to the destroyers; those behind stood on their toes, climbed onto the winches, the spindles, their neighbours' shoulders. They yelled for all they were worth. The deck resembled a market place—if we overlook the abundance of sailor dirks and the fishermen's menacing glances. They all craned their necks and gazed at us with curiosity.

I looked at our cutter. A shell, a mere shell, and her little gun—a needle! But what dignity! She held her course without increasing speed, just as if she hadn't noticed the signals of the leading destroyer. I could not see what was going on on the *Sobol*, for the right side of the bridge hid her from view.

Gutorov, who had made the round of the posts, quickly went up on top and now tried to make out the destroyer's signals.

"Stop the engine. Lay to. Lay to. Lay to immediately!"

"How do you like that!" said Kostya indignantly. "Just look at them! Are they mad?"

Both destroyers had removed the covers from their guns on the bow.

With their narrow bodies, powerful, slanting funnels, sharp stems and wake waves rising above the stern, the pirates had a most persuasive appearance. Skilfully bypassing our small caravan, they slowed down and took a parallel course, continuing to threaten us:

"Why have you seized the ships? Do you regard them as booty?"

I glanced at the *Smyeli*. Absolute silence. The deck was deserted. The cover was still on the gun. Koloskov paced the bridge, his arms crossed behind his back.

"Why don't we answer?" asked Kostya nervously. "Look, the gun crew has taken up stations."

"That's right. we're not answering," said the bosun.

"But why? We haven't even beat the alarm."

"So we haven't," said the bosun.

The destroyer approached to half a cable length from the *Smyeli*. The faces of the sailors stationed at their guns were clearly visible.

"This is very serious," said Kostya excitedly. "What are they doing? This smacks of Sarajevo." He had just read Poincaré's *Memoirs* and now referred to it in every other word.

"That was Sarajevo, and this is Kamchatka," answered Shirokikh sensibly.

"This is a shot of principle. A conflict! I'm afraid we'll let loose such. . . ."

"Just don't be afraid."

Receiving no answer, the destroyer veered and tried to get in the way of the *Smyeli*. Koloskov turned to port and slowed down. The destroyer veered and again got in front of the *Smyeli*. The cutter then turned to starboard.

They zigzagged along in this way for nine miles. In our language this is called playing the game of he who loses, wins.

During these manoeuvres the second destroyer sided up to the *Osaka-Maru*, repeating one and the same signal over and over again: "Return the ship. Return the ship."

All the men of the *Osaka-Maru* were crowded up on deck. There were sailors in bright yellow coveralls, agile and noisy boatmen, fishermen in corduroy jackets and

rubber boots, machinists of the flotilla, winchmen, pilots, the foppish stokers, and crab cutters with acid-corroded hands. Away from their stuffy and stultifying holds, they were all discussing excitedly the chances of the cutters and the destroyers.

The game of he who loses wins ended in a tie. Then, slowing down, the destroyers approached the *Smyeli* from both sides, sandwiching her in as though to crush her.

The *Sobol* had been at the end of the caravan all this time. At this new manoeuvre she immediately flew forward and sounded the alarm.

The first destroyer signalled: "Suggest the commanders of the cutters appear for negotiations." The *Smyeli* answered: "Not authorized to negotiate."

For about ten minutes all four moved forward bunched together in the form of a cross with the top lopped off. Behind them followed a twisting path of foam. Then the destroyers rushed forward like horses touched with a spur, and smoking heavily proceeded northward.

Kostya, who had grown noticeably subdued as he followed the destroyers' tactics, again revived.

"Aha! They lost!" he shouted exultantly. "And what did I say? The most important thing is to keep your temper. They're going away. Hon-est to goodness, going away!"

"I think not," said the bosun gravely.

The fog closed in and shut out the wake of the destroy-

ers. Soon the *Smyeli* also disappeared from view. The bow of the crab ship with its massive winches and deck structures lay before us immobile and black, like a mountain.

Slowing down, we began to sound our siren. Judging by the echo the coast was no more than two miles away, for it returned on the ninth second.

We didn't eat any too well. The tins which Skvortsov had heated up in the caboose stank. In one of them Shirokikh found a bit of rag and glass. I extracted a scrap of soap.

"Did you move away from the stove?" asked Gutorov.

"No—that is, only to get some water."

"Then everything's clear. Throw it all overboard."

During the day we ate chocolate and hardtack; in the evening, hardtack and chocolate. No one felt hungry but everyone was sleepy. The ship's roll and the thirty-hour watch were having their effect.

The caravan continued to move northward. Every hour the *Smyeli* turned back and inspected the ships carefully. I could see Koloskov's oilcloth hood and broad shoulders on the bridge all the time. When he rested was a mystery to me, but his husky bass retained the same even note. The lieutenant evinced an unflagging interest in the work of the engine, and suggested that we drag Kositsyn up into the fresh air more frequently.

VI

The destroyers were waiting for us near Utashut Island. As soon as they sighted the caravan they simultaneously turned on their searchlights. Two long blue bars fell on the water along our course. It was impossible to avoid them. One of the searchlights met the *Smyeli* and silently accompanied the cutter to the north; the other began to count the ships in the caravan. After reaching the *Sobol* it returned and hit the *Osaka-Maru* right between the eyes.

The light was so bright that I had to throw my hand up over my eyes. It became practically impossible to steer the ship by following the *Smyeli*. I could see neither the shore nor the signal lights. Everything outside the smoky blue beams blackened. In front of me, at eye level, hung a blinding disk that irritated to the point of pain.

The whole ship was submerged in gloom. The bridge alone blazed white high in the darkness. This put the boarding group in a difficult position. Every movement, every step, was in full view of the destroyers and the men on the *Osaka-Maru*.

This was just what the Japanese wanted. For half an hour they inspected us minutely, occasionally turning the rays to the stern or the bow. The strong light made my eyes tear. Gutorov ordered me to leave the wheel and go to the reserve helm at the stern. To avoid arousing sus-

picion, Shirokikh took my place. For about ten minutes we had the pleasure of outwitting the enemy, but the beam, groping along the stern, found me behind the other wheel. I was forced to return to the bridge under its escort.

That is how we fought our little war: a tactical war of races, camouflage, tricks and dodges, a war in which searchlight rays replaced gunfire.

Hiding behind the boats, the ventilation funnels and the deckhouses, I ran from wheel to wheel, and after me leaped the smoky blue beam.

I soon felt that the destroyer could see clear down to my backbone beneath my monkey jacket. The light pierced me through and through. It penetrated my eyes behind closed lids, ferreted me out wherever I was, pursued and seared me. For several hours on end our group had that abominable feeling of a muzzle directed right at our temples.

I could not help but think, as I tried to make out the face of the compass, how nice it would be to fire one brief machine-gun burst—just one—right at the mirror, into the brazen, unblinking eye.

At two in the morning the searchlight went out and we heard the sound of an engine. Two officers from the destroyer were trying to climb up the hang ladder which someone had let down. They were driven away from the port side only to turn to the starboard. From there they began to shout for the captain of the *Osaka-Maru*.

It was some time before we could interfere with their conversation, since the captain was talking to the officers through the porthole in his cabin. The "guests" were insisting on something. The old man answered in monosyllables.

"*A so-des—so-so. A so-des so-so.* Ah, yes—yes, yes."

The launch took off only after receiving a triple warning supported by the click of a rifle bolt.

"Hey, Russke!" they shouted from the stern. "Hey, Russke! Fool, go home!"

"A savage lot, after all," said Shirokikh contemptuously. "No understanding, no tact."

Silence fell. The caravan moved along in absolute darkness, all the thicker after the scorching beams of the searchlights.

The sea had a phosphorescent gleam. Two pale green grooves formed at the stem of the *Osaka-Maru* and disappeared far beyond the stern. The powerful strokes of the screw far below in the darkness sent up swarms of darting sparks. The sea gave birth to a Milky Way of sparks, motion, foam, and gentle lights which vanished into the depths.

The only blot on the picture was the Japanese destroyers. Lights extinguished, they moved north with us. Now, however, they did not try to communicate with the crab ship.

We were growing accustomed to our dangerous neighbours when the leading destroyer sent up a rocket. Simul-

taneously the lights went out on the crab ship and on the feeder.

"What's the matter?" Gutorov called down the tube.

There was no answer.

"Engine room!"

"Wah . . . a-ga-a-a . . . ." came through the tube.

Something strange was going on down below. Someone was shouting orders. An excited babel of voices answered him.

Then silence, followed by a ringing cry—it sounded like two heavy blows on an empty barrel—a long, frightened cry, almost like a groan. Then the rumble of iron plates underfoot. And again a long pause.

"Engine room!"

This time the voice of our machinist came through the tube.

"They've gone," said Kositsyn.

"Who?"

"Everybody's left, the scum!"

We rushed into the darkness, down hot ladders illumined only by side lanterns.

It was quiet there.

The sourish smell of gunpowder came out of the darkness.

"I'm here," said Kositsyn.

Crouching near the ladder, he was pulling a knot tight on his left arm with his teeth. Near him, on the floor, lay a revolver.

"They left," he said with a wry face. "Went through the bunker."

The door leading into the stokehold was open. Four furnaces, deserted by the Japanese stokers, were still roaring and throwing gleaming patches on the large vertical connecting rods which extended far into the blackness beyond.

Zimin, naked to the waist, was running from furnace to furnace, breaking up the red-hot slag with a crowbar.

On a heap of coal lay a dead Japanese in a short blue jacket with the firm's mark on the back.

Some five minutes earlier he had come down the ventilation funnel on a rope and attacked Kositsyn, who was trying to persuade the stokers to remain at their posts.

The blow of the crowbar tore a jagged, bleeding wound from the wrist to the elbow of his left arm.

"What could I do?" asked Kositsyn in self-justification.

"Right, quite right," said the bosun, although he was plainly upset by this unexpected turn of events.

I covered the dead man with a tarpaulin, and Gutorov bandaged Kositsyn's arm.

"One got away—evidently wounded."

"Now that's bad," said the bosun.

After thinking it over we decided to leave the corpse in the stokehold. The sight of the dead man on deck would have touched off all the fishermen and sailors, excited as they were by vodka and the formidable look of the destroyers.

We communicated with the *Smyeli* and the lieutenant boarded the *Osaka-Maru* in motion.

He stayed no more than a minute, for the destroyers turned on their searchlights again, and groups of hostile fishermen began to come up on deck.

The lieutenant approved our tactics and suggested sending two of our sailors down to the stokehold. He could spare nobody because the *Smyeli* had only a handful as it was.

"Don't goad the dogs on," he called from the hang ladder. "Don't mind their blustering. The main thing is to keep cool."

The cutter spluttered and disappeared from sight. We were again alone.

The deck of the *Osaka-Maru*, which had been deserted some ten minutes before, quickly filled with fishermen. The men rushed up to deck as though an alarm had been sounded throughout the ship. Carbide lanterns and short-stemmed pipes blinked everywhere. We could hear excited voices, whistling, shrill cries.

Japanese fishermen are an excitable lot, easily stirred. A threatening gesture, a harsh word, even an awkward, uncertain movement, is enough to turn the crowd, conscious of its strength, from words to action.

Soon some drunkards appeared. The enforced stoppage of work deprived the fishermen of their infinitesimal wages, and the crowd saw in us the source of all their misfortunes. The noise on deck grew louder with

every minute. Many looked menacingly at us and even brazenly flourished their knives.

The fishermen grouped in circles around their instigators, who were perched on winches, bollards or coils of rope. I noticed that in the centre of the noisiest and most excited group was a man with a blood-stained bandage around his head. He wailed shrilly like a woman, pointing all the time in our direction.

It was no longer possible to get to the bow or the stern, where four of our men were stationed. Our posts became little islands cut off from the centre of the ship.

It began to grow light.

The goups of fishermen merged into one raging mass that surged restlessly between the bridge and the tall structure on the forecastle. Those who came out of the holds pressed down on the men in front; some even jumped on the shoulders of their neighbours; and all of them, inflamed by the instigators, became more and more menacing.

Someone stamped with his wooden sandals. The crowd seconded him with such violence that the iron hull rumbled.

A vague feeling of some great, imminent danger overwhelmed me. Like when the sea suddenly darkens and a cold ripple—the harbinger of a squall—runs over it.

I glanced at my mates. The bosun was studying the shore, the stolid Shirokikh—his compass, and Kostya—his belt buckle.

They all pretended to ignore the crowd.

VII

"What'll happen now?" asked Kostya anxiously. "This is very serious. They should be quieted somehow—told.... Look—knives! It's mutiny!"

We could already see Povorotny Lighthouse when the leading destroyer signalled:

"Compelled to act. Taking decisive measures in the name of the Imperial Government."

The second destroyer simultaneously laid a smoke screen and fired a shot from her bow gun. Both cutters beat the alarm. The *Smyeli* replied: "Will not negotiate. Leave waters of U.S.S.R. immediately."

With these words she turned and went full speed ahead toward the destroyer. I don't know what the lieutenant had in mind, but the cover had been removed from his one and only gun and the gun crew stood at their posts. The *Sobol* came flying at the heels of the *Smyeli.*

I could see no more. A stinging yellow cloud hid the cutters and the cliff with the iron tower of the lighthouse from view.

"We must act! Look, they're climbing up the forecastle!"

"Calm down, now," said Gutorov.

He was looking at the forecastle, where Zhukov and Chashchin were on duty. In the morning we had still communicated with the bow post along a bridge swung over the deck on two bars. But the bridge had been

thrown down by the excited crowd. About a hundred and fifty men, whistling and shouting to encourage one another, pressed up against the high iron platform on which the two men were standing.

The crowd yelled up to them:

"Stink! Russke dogs!"

"Hey, Bolshevik! Come down!"

A fisherman in a striped sailor's jersey and bright-yellow trousers climbed up on the shrouds and shouted one-syllabled Russian swearwords.

"I'd stop that parrot," declared Kostya, "but it's a pity to waste a bullet. . . ."

"Gently there, gently there," said the bosun. "Oh, what a pity!"

What we had all feared now happened. Zhukov lost his temper and went them one better in the matter of swearwords. That was a mistake! Several of the large glass floats which crab ships attach to their nets went flying at our men. One of the floats broke against the mast, but the other caught Zhukov on the leg. He automatically caught the float and threw it back into the very thick of the crowd. There was a roar in answer.

I saw a flock of knives flash across the deck. Zhukov clutched at his shoulder, Chashchin at his leg. Short fishermen's knives clattered on the deck around our men.

To tell the truth, I hadn't looked at the compass for quite some time. Zhukov, crouching, was unfastening his holster with his left hand. Chashchin, who was only

slightly wounded, stood in front of his comrade and aimed at the crowd, his revolver resting on the crook of his arm.

Kostya grabbed the bosun by the sleeve:

"What's all this, Comrade Commander! Hurry! Why don't you shoot!"

Suddenly we felt some hot drops. A deafening blast rent the air.

Gutorov was pulling the whistle rope. The *Osaka-Maru* bellowed, choking on her steam, and the stony coast resounded with the echoes.

The crowd froze. The dumbfounded fishermen looked up at the cloud of steam and at the squat, resolute figure of our bosun, who seemed to be shouting to the whole ocean:

"Sta-and from under! Ekh, you! Take care!"

That was just the thing. A shot would only have incited the fishermen to further violence, but the frantic, intolerant whistle fell like a torrent flooding the deck and the sea and moderated the violent mood of the rebels. It thundered with ear-splitting persistence, angrily, anxiously: "Sta-and from under! Sta-and from under! Sta-and from under!"

When the steam gave out the deck became totally silent. It was so quiet you could hear the lapping of the waves.

Hundreds of fishermen looked up at the bosun. Gutorov straightened his monkey jacket, went up to the ladder, and said angrily:

"Cut out all these tricks! We think you men, but you

only rats, tfu! Just so much scum. Quiet now! Listen to me. You walk in hold, sleep-sleep. We steer ship. If anything happens I'll take measures without a trial."

The bosun had probably never made such a long speech in all his life. Finishing, he leisurely blew his nose, turned to Skvortsov, and said:

"Go to the forecastle before they recover. Quick now!"

The men there had not asked for help, but it was evident that Chashchin could not manage the bandaging by himself. He had torn open the wounded man's shirt, and, still holding his revolver, was winding a bandage around Zhukov as if it were a reel of telephone wire.

"Aye, aye, sir!" answered Kostya. "I-I'm going!"

He went up to the ladder, which led right into the watchful, hostile crowd, and glanced down indecisively.

"I'm going—right away," he repeated hastily. "Now, Comrade Commander, I'll just. . . ."

He went over to the helm, squatted and began to rummage in his kitbag.

The deck buzzed with voices. Nothing is worse than hesitation. The hostile crowd understood and interpreted his irresolution in its own way. Someone laughed shrilly. The fellow in the yellow trousers again started moving about behind the fishermen.

The spell was broken. It was now unthinkable for Skvortsov to make his way to the forecastle through the crowd, packed more closely than the seeds on a sunflower. Only one way remained: to cross over the deck on

the massive iron-bound cranes used to raise the *kungasi* aboard. Attached at one end to the mast, a beam hung almost horizontally over the deck, its free end resting on the bridge. Another beam stretched in the opposite direction from the mast to the bow. Together they formed a narrow path stretching over the deck at a height of some ten to twelve feet.

"Yes, yes, in a minute," mumbled Kostya. "Where is it? Here—no, not that—I'm ready."

He kept fumbling in his bag, grabbing first the gauze, then the bandages. He hurriedly took out the bottle of iodine, uncorked it and rubbed some on his hands, and then, thoroughly confused, began to wipe his hands on his uniform.

"Ready?" asked Gutorov.

"Yes, yes. This seems to be all.... Now what? Only...."

I didn't recognize Kostya's voice. It was lifeless and hollow. His lips trembled, like a boy about to cry. It was a shameful and disgusting sight. I turned away....

Gutorov looked beyond Kostya to the mast.

"That's the only way," he said to himself.

"Comrade Commander, I'll explain right away.... I canno...."

"But you can, you can do anything," said the bosun calmly. He pulled Skvortsov to his feet, put his kitbag in place and whispered something in his ear. Then he pushed the fellow toward the railing.



"I canno. . . ."

"You don't look down," Gutorov said loudly. "Put your foot down firmly, step lively, and look straight at Zhukov. After you bandage him you can remain there with them."

Gutorov did not demand anything; nor did he give the terror-stricken orderly any instructions. He spoke more evenly and more gently than usual and with that quiet assurance which immediately cuts short all objections. The bosun had no doubts whatever but that the unnerved, overwrought Skvortsov would be able to make the twenty metres along the narrow beams.

I don't know what he whispered in Kostya's ear, but the bosun's superb confidence had an evident effect on the orderly. He straightened up, squared his shoulders and even tried to squeeze out a smile.

"The main thing is to get angry," the bosun advised. "If you're angry, you can do anything."

Kostya climbed over the rail and started along the beam. At the beginning he moved slowly, sidewise, pulling up one leg after the other. The beam was slippery, the bag weighed him down on one side, and he was constantly throwing out his arms to steady himself. His head was bent: he was looking down at his feet and at the crowd below.

Somewhere in the middle he slipped and lurched backward. The crowd beneath roared. Kostya reeled more heavily.

I closed my eyes—for a second, no more. There was a sound of cursing, and then a cry, as sharp and brief as a pistol shot.

The beam was empty. The orderly had managed to run to the mast. Embracing the mast, he climbed over onto the other cantilever and went on slowly, as slowly as if he were carrying a glass of water.

Now he tore his eyes away from the crowd. He looked only at Zhukov. He walked faster and faster and then ran, steadily and slightly pigeon-toed, balancing himself with his arms.

He waved his arms, leaped—and then was bending over Zhukov.

Only then did I realize that Gutorov had been resting his machine gun against the rail, his finger on the release.

When he saw that Kostya had made it, the bosun pulled his hand away and wiped his sweating palm on his monkey jacket.

"And I would have fallen," he admitted with a sigh of relief. "There's a tight rope walker for you. Some devil!"

"But he was scared enough."

"What of it?" said Gutorov simply. "Even a machine gun has stoppages. Look! What's that? What the d-devil!"

The *Osaka-Maru* had crawled slowly out from behind the smoke screen, and the first thing I saw were the snowy wakes of the Japanese destroyers.

The pirates were tearing through the sea to the south-

east, and right behind them, leaping from wave to wave, flew the *Smyeli* and the *Sobol*. . . .

"Not there!" yelled Gutorov. "Look, here they are!"

I heard a sound somewhere overhead like the ripping of a sail.

Three red-winged planes flew out from behind a hill and sped seaward.

Again thunder rolled over the blueness of the pacified waters. Then came the sabre-like gleam of propellers, the familiar, heartsinking drone of shells—or was it a bass string? Six fighter planes were driving the pirates from the gates of Avachin Bay to the east! To the devil! Out to sea!

The deck of the *Osaka-Maru* grew as quiet as the fields in autumn. The five hundred men stood motionless, their necks craned, listening to the angry drone of the planes. It now sounded like a farewell message to the fleeing destroyers. With its inverted reflection of Vilyuchin Hill and the rosy triangles of sails, the bay looked like a big mountain lake. The *Osaka-Maru* turned into the bay.

We turned to take a last look at the destroyers. They were moving very fast, so fast that the water flew in cascades over their decks. They were undoubtedly first-class ships.

1939

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